

Wouter van der Veen

Van Gogh: A Literary Mind



Van Gogh Studies 2

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Literature in the correspondence
of Vincent van Gogh

Van Gogh Studies 2

Wouter van der Veen

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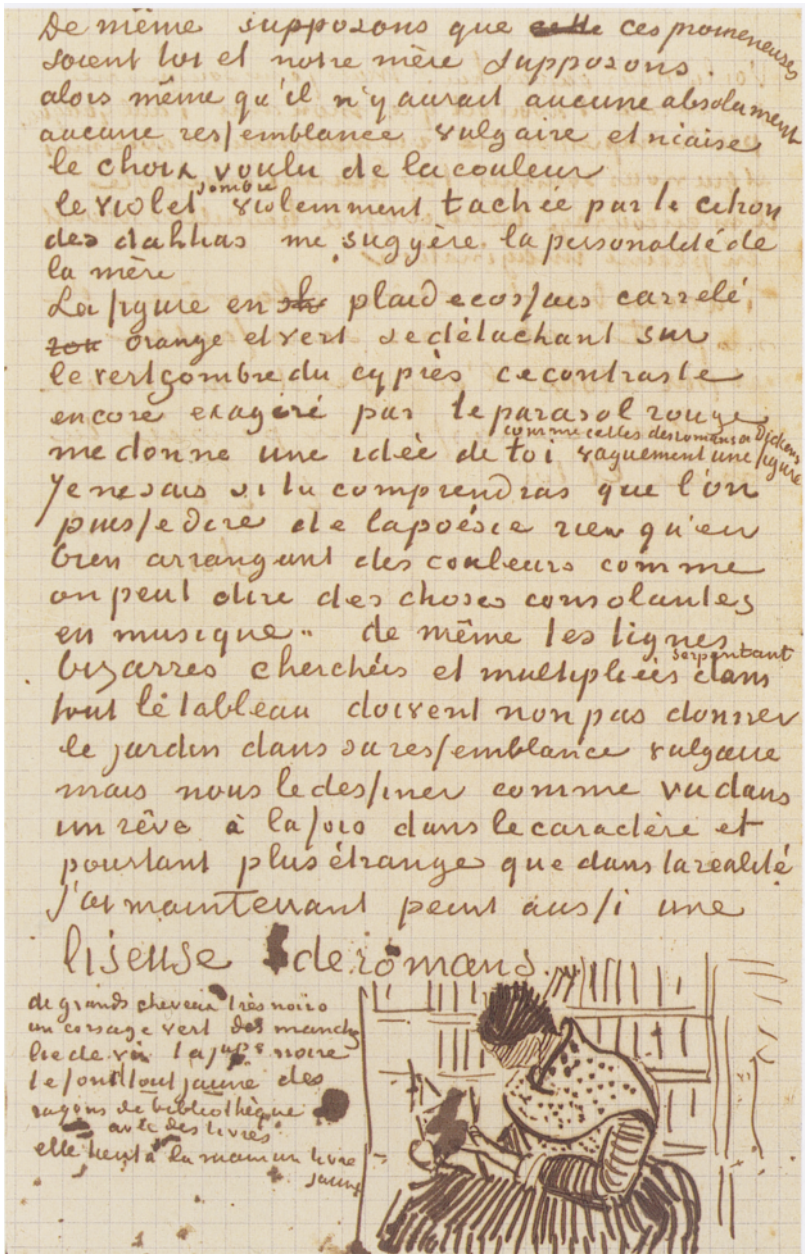
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Contents

	Foreword	7
	<i>Chris Stolwijk</i>	
	Note to the reader	9
	Introduction	11
1	Early letters	21
2	Body and soul	41
3	The imitation of Jesus Christ	55
4	Rebellion, suffering and sentiment	69
5	Strategic reading	85
6	The Hague: Realism and reality	129
7	Nuenen: The painter of peasants	149
8	Paris	167
9	Last letters	193
	Conclusion	227
	Notes	229
	Bibliography	247
	Concordance	251
	Index	253
	About the author	259
	Author's acknowledgements	261



1. Vincent van Gogh, *Woman reading a novel*; sketch in a letter from Vincent to his sister Wil, 16 november 1888 [720], Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; F - JH 1633

Foreword

Gauguin once described his friend and fellow artist Van Gogh as a man obsessed by literature. 'Obsession' is a word often used in connection with the life and work of Vincent van Gogh, but to say that he developed a passion for books at an early age is an understatement. In his surviving correspondence, which spans some eighteen years, he mentions at least 150 authors and around 800 literary works – so many that it goes beyond the scope of this foreword to list even a few examples.

Van Gogh read voraciously, he read widely, he often had several books on the go at the same time, and he tried to share with his friends and family his fascination with reading. He incorporated what he had read or encountered into his letters, and drew his correspondents' attention to new discoveries and to passages he regarded as important. More than once, with his characteristic conviction and persistence, he tried to persuade them that it really was absolutely essential for them to read particular works.

Like his artistic oeuvre, Van Gogh's 'reading history' reflects the haphazard and extraordinary development of a self-taught man. Despite all his reading, he was not a literary man as we would define the term today; he was, rather, an idiosyncratic book lover, who simply could not survive without reading. As a rule he took little notice of current views and accepted theories: most of the time he decided for himself what he wanted to read, and what he did and did not choose to take from his reading.

This is not to say, however, that Van Gogh read at random whatever he happened to find and then just let the words go out of his head. It is striking to see how he not only tried to assimilate what he read into his conceptions about the general trends and ideas of his age, but also sought to give it a place in his artistic endeavours and his daily struggle to make a living.

Although Van Gogh's extraordinary 'relationship to literature cannot be listed in a neat, balanced, harmonious table', as Wouter van der Veen, the author of this study, rightly argues, a better understanding of the development and composition of his literary panorama really can help to put his views and his taste into clearer perspective.

A critical examination of Van Gogh's correspondence and his countless references to literary works enables us to trace fairly accurately the artist's intellectual development, his interest in books and the assimilation of the ideas expressed in them into his own life and work. In *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind. Literature in the*

correspondence of Vincent van Gogh, Wouter van der Veen painstakingly follows this path. Unlike earlier pioneering studies in which Van Gogh's literary views are usually regarded in the light of his artistic development, Van der Veen specifically considers Van Gogh as *a reader* and examines his intellectual development. Van Gogh's artistic oeuvre is quite definitely secondary here, while 'biographical elements are mentioned only when they are necessary to clarify an argument'.

Van der Veen comes to the conclusion that Van Gogh, who certainly held very decided views and (artistic) ideas, never conformed 'to any school of thought, movement, school or particular religious dogma ... Vincent was open to other people's thinking to the point where his openness was more precious to him than the idea he had discovered'.

Van Gogh: A Literary Mind is the second volume and the first monograph in the *Van Gogh Studies* series. This book is a reworking of the PhD thesis with which the author obtained his doctorate at the University of Utrecht in 2006. His supervisors were Maarten van Buuren and Peter Hecht. In producing this version the author worked closely with the editors of *Van Gogh Studies*, particularly Leo Jansen and Richard Thomson, and with guest editor Louis van Tilborgh. The result is an original study of an important aspect of Van Gogh's life and work, written in a highly readable and individual style.

For his systematic approach Van der Veen was able to use the most recent transcriptions of and notes to Van Gogh's correspondence. These were made as part of the *Van Gogh Letters Project* instigated by the Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute and headed by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker. They will be published in 2009. The author was associated with this project for some years for the study of Van Gogh's letters in French.

May you have an inspiring journey through Van Gogh's *Literary Mind*.

For the editors,

Chris Stolwijk
Editor-in-chief *Van Gogh Studies*

Note to the reader

Van Gogh Studies publishes recent, in-depth research into Van Gogh and related areas of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art and culture, which is representative of current trends in the study of western European art. The series will be published annually as an anthology of essays, and will, on occasion, also include monographic studies.

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The numbers for Van Gogh's letters that are used here refer to the new edition of Van Gogh's letters, to be published by the Van Gogh Museum, Mercatorfonds and Thames and Hudson in 2009: *Vincent van Gogh – The Letters*, edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker. A concordance, showing the corresponding letter numbers used in the earlier editions of Van Gogh's correspondence can be found on p. 251. The English translations of the letters follow those in the new edition (Van Gogh's original texts can be found on the internet version of this edition). The original texts of all other quoted extracts will be found in the endnotes.

References to Van Gogh's work are given in the form of two numbers. The first F number refers to Jacob-Baart de la Faille, *The works of Vincent van Gogh: His paintings and drawings*, Amsterdam 1970; and the second JH number to Jan Hulsker, *The new complete Van Gogh: Paintings, drawings, sketches. Revised and enlarged edition of the catalogue raisonné of the works of Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 1996.

Introduction

If you immerse yourself in Vincent van Gogh's writings you will encounter more than one hundred and fifty authors from some ten countries, at least two hundred works in four languages, and almost three thousand years of literary history. From Homer to Zola, Van Gogh read, copied, rejected, adored, returned to, quoted, distorted, re-read, condemned and recommended countless books and articles, and we are still far from being able to draw up a complete inventory of them. However, Van Gogh statements in the hundreds of letters that have come down to us, do allow us to form a clear idea of what literature meant to him.

My desire to take on the vast subject of Van Gogh's literary sources was prompted by contact with the original letters, in which literary references are both numerous and revealing.¹ These references, and the context in which they are used, take us much further than would a mere list of the painter's literary tastes; they enable us, to a large extent, to understand the ideas that powered his thinking.

Of course, his relationship to literature cannot be listed in a neat, balanced, harmonious table. Van Gogh's literary path was tortuous and difficult. Just like his life and his work, it was made up of decisions and hesitations, advances and setbacks, victories and defeats – and it ended with an agonizing silence.

The subject is not a new one. Many other authors had tackled it before I began writing this book. From the outset, some of those who had known and spent time with Van Gogh, including the painters Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard, pointed out that he habitually called upon the authors he admired to support his ideas. However, Van Gogh's relationship with literature has never formed the main subject of an essay dealing with all the references that are found.

The diversity of the painter's literary sources seemed to make it impossible to approach the subject in a systematic way. To start with, I therefore planned to limit the field of study to the literary references found in Van Gogh's French correspondence, from 1886 to 1890; but the results of this were unsatisfactory. To include also what he read *before* 1886 produced a dramatic expansion of the material, making it necessary to construct a database covering his entire correspondence (1872-1890). From this, clear patterns in his reading behaviour emerged, as well as a remarkable consistency of themes. However, these patterns and themes, based upon an eclectic choice of works, seemed extremely idiosyncratic; the material made it impossible to position Van Gogh in any dogmatic, formal or religious movement. Concepts such as realism, symbolism or naturalism proved inadequate to analyze

his position as a reading, cultured artist. Even though the painter was extremely sensitive to his intellectual and creative surroundings, the influence of this environment, as the following pages will demonstrate, does not reach the core of Van Gogh's individuality and originality.

Van Gogh was not only a reader. He was also the author of powerful letters, which today form part of the world's literary heritage. The literary quality of his writing did not pass unnoticed by his contemporaries, any more than his literary references. Bernard, an amateur poet and great lover of poetry, was so impressed by Vincent's *literature* that he published extracts from his letters as early as 1893, only three years after his friend's death. They appeared in the *Mercur de France*,² an event about which Théodore Duret wrote in 1916: 'The publication by the *Mercur de France* of his letters to his brother Theodore and to Emile Bernard, between 1893 and 1897, began to attract some attention to him, but it showed only that he was gifted with a real literary talent and thus failed to bring about any change in the general misunderstanding of him as an artist.'³

Thus, it was the posthumous publication of his correspondence that gave the first impetus to his recognition. The editors at the *Mercur de France* considered that it had sufficient *literary* value to publish extracts from it, and indeed did so for a period of four years. This was not conventional literature, and there was nothing academic about it, but its integrity, its ingenuousness, its simplicity and its profundity made the material disconcerting and effective, worthy of praise and interest. Later, in 1911, Emile Bernard, who realized very early on that Van Gogh's correspondence was not destined merely to end up in the archives, published a collection of the letters that had previously appeared in the *Mercur de France*.⁴ In the preface to this work, he drew the reader's attention to the artistic nature of the manuscripts:

So what does it matter if his style is not correct, it is alive, and our indulgence will sense how to pay delicate attention to it, as when we sometimes sense that that there are superior beings who cannot speak our language at all. 'Is it not the intensity of thought we are seeking, rather than the calmness of touch,' he wrote to me.

His remarks regarding his painting, which seem to apologize in advance for its slovenliness and slightly mad energy, I have applied to his letters. It is the thinking that we must feel, it is the real life which we must find therein. The calmness of touch is certainly absent; but what intensity! And what joy they will give us after so much pedantic writing by people who have nothing to say.

Ardour has no need of syntax or complicated sentences when it attains the moral ecstasy of meditation and creation.⁵

This preface, this almost declamatory apologia, praises the foremost virtue of Van Gogh's literature, which above all else is composed of *spontaneity* – in the primary meaning of the word, that its movement is generated from within itself. Van Gogh constructed his sentences as he composed his paintings, according to his convictions, and not according to the grammatical conventions or social practices of the moment. His contemporaries stated that the same applied to his conversation, which was poorly served by an uncontrolled, coarse and unpleasant voice, whose accents and outbursts were never tempered.⁶ Nothing could make Vincent adhere to that minimum level of restraint which forms the cement in human relationships, *social conventions*; he said what he thought, thought what he said, and acted accordingly, despite the admonitions of those who felt close enough to him to criticize him, like his father, his teacher (briefly) Anton Mauve, or H.G. Tersteeg.⁷ And, unable to make itself understood by speech, this literary mind turned to writing; and protected itself by writing, creating for itself a frame of reference built up of authors and titles that he presented to all those who were not convinced by his own words alone.

Works and articles dealing with Van Gogh's literary knowledge:
advances and deficiencies

Confronted by these recurrent, endless literary references, one might be tempted to conclude that Van Gogh was influenced and shaped by his wide reading. But we immediately come up against the problem of the complex notion of influence. If, by 'influence', we mean a force capable of conditioning and directing an individual's choices, acts or ideas, Van Gogh was not influenced by any literary source, except for the Bible. If, on the other hand, we mean by 'influence' a force which has no action beyond the interpretation made of it by the individual who is subject to it, Van Gogh was *very much* influenced by the books he consulted. He was not shaped by his reading; he was shaped *through contact* with numerous books. The painter did not allow himself to be guided by anyone or anything. His independence of mind, which is one of the foundations of his creative genius, remains one of the most striking aspects of his personality. As the examples offered in the following pages will show, he *assimilated* the literary material which came his way according to his own needs and his own interests, never hesitating to transform it in order to give it an entirely personal form.

Van Gogh, who possessed a literary and well-read mind and a lively writing style, never conformed to any school of thought, movement, school or particular religious dogma. To reduce the painter to one 'ism' or another would be to deny the eclectic nature of his tastes and ignore the demands of his mind. Vincent was open to other people's thinking to the point where this openness was more

precious to him than the idea he had discovered. He was not a realist, nor a naturalist, symbolist, post-impressionist, pre-expressionist, Calvinist, socialist, republican, revolutionary or anarchist. Basing their work on the correspondence, which they see as providing reliable and intimate documentary evidence with copious literary references to indicate preferences or tendencies, many authors have attempted to demonstrate that Van Gogh was influenced by one movement or another. However, if certain categories are a useful aid to understanding literature as a whole, taking account of the historical and geographical context, they are inadequate for analyzing the work of one particular author, especially for determining the intellectual landscape of an individual like Vincent van Gogh.

The literature devoted to Van Gogh is a dense forest, in which the best and the worst are found side by side, offering contrary explanations for almost everything in the Dutch painter's life and work. In the majority of serious works about the man who wanted to be known as Vincent,⁸ frequent mention is made of the importance that literature played in his life. However, any attempt to summarize all these articles and other works would do no more than give a sharper outline to a blurred reality.

This book does not claim to take account of everything that has been written about Van Gogh. Although the list of works cited may appear rather short, numerous books, articles and databases were consulted before going to press, but the choice was made not to cite texts unless they were explicitly used in this essay. Indeed, there are few studies in which the subject of Van Gogh's reading matter plays a significant part. That being said, certain essential commentaries devote many pages to Van Gogh's reading matter, sometimes even as the main subject of study,⁹ and a number of these will appear repeatedly here. However, the principal originality of my approach is that I do not seek to relate the literature Van Gogh consulted to his painting, or to rely upon the texts for biographical purposes; I want to limit myself to Van Gogh the *reader* and to his intellectual development. His artistic oeuvre plays a secondary role in this work, and biographical elements are mentioned only when they are necessary to clarify an argument.

In 1935, Alfred H. Barr published a list of the books which Van Gogh mentioned that he had read in his correspondence.¹⁰ Although not exhaustive and in places incorrect, this list had the merit of presenting a fairly faithful idea of Van Gogh's reading programme, which, by its eclectic nature, was in itself sufficient to show that the painter of *Starry night* did not allow himself to be guided by any dogma, trend or school.

It was not until 1948 that an article on Van Gogh appeared with literature as its main subject: 'Van Gogh and literature' by Carl Nordenfalk. Nordenfalk's starting-point is the idea that Van Gogh was torn between two basic tendencies: a taste for books and a taste for art. The author explains that Van Gogh had grown up in a 'bookish' environment and that, while his taste for art was stimulated by the seven

years he spent working for Goupil & Co., his taste for books regained the upper hand when he decided to follow in his father's footsteps and become a pastor. In the end, however, books led him into an impasse when he failed in his attempt to become an evangelist, a 'sower of the Word', and they had to yield to art. The interesting feature of Nordenfalk's article is that it demonstrates the links between some of Van Gogh's paintings and certain books he had read. Nevertheless, the author takes a few short cuts when it comes to presenting an overall view of Vincent's reading matter, which Barr's list was able to do. For example, Nordenfalk missed the opportunity to link *La berceuse* (ill. 28) with Loti's *Pêcheur d'Islande*.¹¹

In 1950, Jean Seznec published a six-page descriptive article in the *Magazine of Art* entitled 'Literary inspiration in Van Gogh', whose goal was to highlight the supposed part played by certain books and certain literary authors in the Dutch painter's artistic oeuvre,¹² but the article does not provide a complete panorama or a detailed analysis of Van Gogh the *reader*.

The subject of literature in Van Gogh was not tackled again in any systematic or analytical way until Sven Lövgren's 1959 book on *The genesis of modernism*,¹³ in which the author gave a good-humoured riposte to Nordenfalk and Seznec, again with the aim of displaying the influence of what Van Gogh read on his painted work. Lövgren pointed out, pertinently, that Van Gogh was much better educated than Gauguin, that he had read an impressive number of French and English books, and that his literary knowledge extended from Petrarch to Shakespeare and from Goethe to Turgenev, while noting that the modern poets Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud were not mentioned. Lövgren highlighted the essential elements for analyzing a few paintings in which books appear, including *Still life with Bible* (ill. 14), *Portrait of Doctor Gachet* (F 753 JH 2007), and *Still life with a statuette* (ill. 22). He emphasized convincingly the influence that may have been exerted upon Van Gogh by George Eliot's novel *Felix Holt the radical*, whose principal character is driven by a great thirst for social justice,¹⁴ a book which the future painter read when he was in England. Lövgren also highlighted the possible influence of Walt Whitman's poetry, offering a bold interpretation of *Starry night* (ill. 29).

In 1975, an article of fundamental importance was published by A.M. Hamacher, 'Van Gogh – Michelet – Zola',¹⁵ an analysis centred on the two authors most frequently mentioned in the correspondence. The text, once again, proposes to shed light upon Van Gogh's painting rather than his intellectual panorama; it tends to give the impression that Van Gogh painted according to what he was reading, whereas with Van Gogh, reading, painting, day-to-day health, clothing and religious feelings, among other things, are all inextricably linked. Everything is a function of everything else, in a unity which is difficult to detect, but which constitutes Van Gogh's originality. To isolate a single author bypasses this originality and runs the risk of providing too narrow a framework in which to gain a satisfactory grasp of the relationship between Vincent and his books. However,

Hammacher's article is extremely valuable and succeeds, within the confines of fewer than twenty pages, in giving a very accurate idea of the admiration Van Gogh felt for Michelet and Zola.

In 1980, at the time of the exhibition *Vincent van Gogh in zijn Hollandse jaren*, Griselda Pollock produced an important text on the years 1880-1885.¹⁶ The English-speaking author based her work on translated texts, with all their limitations, and attached great importance to the presumed influence of the Scottish thinker Thomas Carlyle. Van Gogh certainly read and appreciated this author, but we must not forget that Carlyle's influence was very great in the nineteenth century, and that Michelet, Taine and Renan were among many who were subject to his influence; moreover Van Gogh discovered Carlyle through Taine,¹⁷ *after* reading Renan and Michelet.

1983 saw the publication of Evert van Uiter's remarkable work, *Vincent van Gogh in creative competition*.¹⁸ For the first time, a leading scholar gave literature the place it deserves in the analysis of Van Gogh's oeuvre. In this essential contribution, the relationship between Gauguin and Van Gogh is subjected to a systematic examination, in which the works read and shared by the two artists serve as the basis for a complete inventory of their aesthetic preoccupations, both shared and divergent. Light is shed upon the role of the historian Taine as a philosopher of art, as well as that played by the Goncourt brothers, representatives of a century marked by the theme of *melancholy*, which goes beyond the traditional distinctions of artistic categories and extends from Diderot to the *Portrait of Doctor Gachet* by way of romanticism, realism and naturalism. While it was not the goal of Van Uiter's work to deal with literature in Van Gogh's work as a whole, it nonetheless demonstrated clearly that any analysis that fails to take account of the painter's reading matter must suffer from sizeable gaps.

In 1985, Jan Hulsker published his dual biography of Vincent and Theo van Gogh, which is undoubtedly the most complete biography to date.¹⁹ However, it would seem that the numerous literary references in the correspondence almost completely escaped the author. Here and there the subject is touched upon, when there is a need to describe an important painting or a vital passage from the correspondence, but always in a very summary manner.

A year later, in 1986, Roland Dorn finished writing a text which would be published in 1990, a monumental and masterly thesis on the decorative scheme planned by Van Gogh when he lived in his 'Yellow House' in Arles in 1888. Dorn casts a vital perspective upon Van Gogh and literature, but, naturally, he does not take account of everything the artist may have read, nor of anything that is not essential for an understanding of the genesis of his decorative scheme. One of Dorn's most important contributions, within the framework of this study, is the bibliography, which is presented in an original way, chronologically, and in which he details the works read by Van Gogh in the period 1885-1890.²⁰

In 1987, an important article by Fieke Pabst and Evert van Uitert completed and corrected Barr's list, providing at last a reliable and near-exhaustive picture of the painter's virtual library, using a methodical and rational approach, which made a fundamental contribution to our knowledge of what Van Gogh read.²¹

In 1990 certain aspects of Van Gogh's interest in religious texts were judiciously clarified by Tsukasa Kōdera.²² He put forward the interesting hypothesis that Van Gogh gradually replaced his religious inclinations with the mystical contemplation of nature that is found in his paintings: the northern churches, painted during the artist's Dutch period, are replaced by the sun and the sunflowers of the south of France. Kōdera's work is fundamental and innovative in so far as it provides a convincing picture, for the first time, of the cultural context in which Van Gogh grew up – amid pastors sensitive to the constant epiphany offered by the observation of nature, and in a Dutch society marked by the power of these pastors, who had a widespread influence upon the prevailing culture. Kōdera also rightly goes back to Robert Rosenblum's *Modern painting and the northern romantic tradition*,²³ where a chapter devoted to Van Gogh emphasizes the importance of German romantic poetry, which was culturally unavoidable during the painter's youth. Neither Kōdera's work, nor that of Verkade-Bruining,²⁴ prevented Kathleen Powers Erickson, in 1998, declaring that 'none of the biographies of Van Gogh has studied his use of pious literature.'²⁵

Also in 1990, Philippe Dagen wrote a preface to Van Gogh's *Correspondance générale*, a re-issue by Gallimard of the 1960 text.²⁶ Here, the painter's literary interests are succinctly commented upon. Although the relationship between Van Gogh and literature is dealt with rather imprecisely, the text nevertheless gives an accurate impression of it.

Of all the texts devoted to literature and Van Gogh, the most remarkable in terms of clarity and erudition is Judy Sund's *True to temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist literature*, a thesis presented in 1992.²⁷ Apart from an in-depth study of Van Gogh's interest in Naturalist literature, and of the effects which that interest may have had on his work, this thesis offers an almost complete panorama of what Van Gogh read, at each moment in his life. Following the pattern of Barr's list, and centred on an attempt to demonstrate the effect of the Naturalist readings on Van Gogh's painting, this work highlights, in a reasoned and systematic way, the relationships that may have existed between the large number of literary sources that Van Gogh had at his disposal and the pictorial material he created. The method used, however, suffers, as was the case in Lövgren's work, from a major bias. The author's thinking, confined within the narrow framework of Naturalism, starts from a preconceived idea rather than the observation of the material as it presents itself, in all its diversity. The major problem with this study is that Van Gogh did not know what Naturalism was, and this makes it more than problematic to project Naturalism onto his work.

Finally, the most recent study in which literature plays an important part was published by Douglas Druick and Peter Kort Zegers in the exhibition catalogue *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*, published in 2002.²⁸ Remarkable and very complete, this text convincingly describes Van Gogh's intellectual journey, both in terms of his ideas and his literary sources. However, it does not aim to give a complete view of these sources, and dwells only on those that the authors consider to be fundamentally important.

The most reliable documents we have for studying the literary interests of the painter from Brabant are, of course, his letters. As this study will demonstrate, these letters are not altogether reliable, a fact which is not always clear. Van Gogh made numerous errors in language, transcription and judgement.²⁹ His memory, although impressive, was not perfect. The painter did not read the books which came his way with full understanding or with an in-depth knowledge of the artistic and literary theories of his time, but, on the contrary, with considerable ingenuousness and with a disconcerting ability to interpret the texts in an entirely personal way. This idiosyncrasy is central to the analysis that follows, which may invite the criticism of authors who are convinced that the intellectual history of the nineteenth century has to be seen as a logical succession of well-organized theories and schools, all harmoniously interlinked. But I am unable to discover a pattern of this kind.

Correspondence: a subjective source

This study is the result of a systematic approach to Van Gogh's correspondence, as regards both form and content. The primary material upon which this analysis is based is a transcription of the painter's original manuscripts, undertaken between 1994 and 2000 at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, within the framework of the preparation of a critical edition under the direction of Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten.³⁰ From this vast body of work, a complete inventory of the literary references identified in the correspondence has been drawn up, by means of a database which classifies these references according to the letter in which they feature, their nature (comparison between authors, comparison between author and painter, incitement, illustration, allusion ...), their date, the author quoted, the work quoted, the recipient of the letter, the themes (love, the land, reading, painting, work, simplicity ...), and the language (of the letter and of any quotation). Quotations from the Bible, which are too numerous, have not been integrated into this inventory. According to the criteria employed in order to define literature (should Alfred Sensier's biography of Millet, an article by Paul Mantz, Zola's *Mes haines*, 'Les isolés' by Aurier in the *Mercure de France* be considered literature?), between 800 and 1100 literary references are found in Van Gogh's correspondence. This

database has made it possible to achieve a clear view of the practice of Van Gogh the reader, although there is one sizeable gap: Van Gogh wrote very few letters during his time in Paris between 1886 and 1888, a period during which he must have discovered many new authors. Another inevitable area of obscurity is formed by the numerous works and articles that Van Gogh undoubtedly read but did not mention in his letters.

Taking account of all the possibilities and impossibilities offered by the subject matter, the subject of this study is the relationship between Van Gogh and his reading matter, within the framework of his spiritual and intellectual development and within the limits of what he mentions in his correspondence. It has, quite intentionally, not taken account of the supposed relationship between the artist's reading and his painted work, and thus offers a different approach to that taken in a number of previous studies. Rather than seeking to know what Van Gogh took from the Bible, from Michelet or from Zola and apply the data extracted to try to understand his paintings better, this study asks what these texts and authors have in common, and what they may have meant to the man who was reading them. This study, which has not been conducted by an art historian and is in no way an exhaustive analysis, attempts a close examination of Van Gogh's literary journey as it emerges through the references found in his correspondence. It is an exploration of the literary universe of a passionate reader, in constant search of texts that can be applied to his own reality. The analysis of the literary material assimilated (or rejected) by the painter enables us better to understand the essential driving forces behind his thinking, beyond all predefined paradigms.

1

Early letters

Literature in Van Gogh's early years

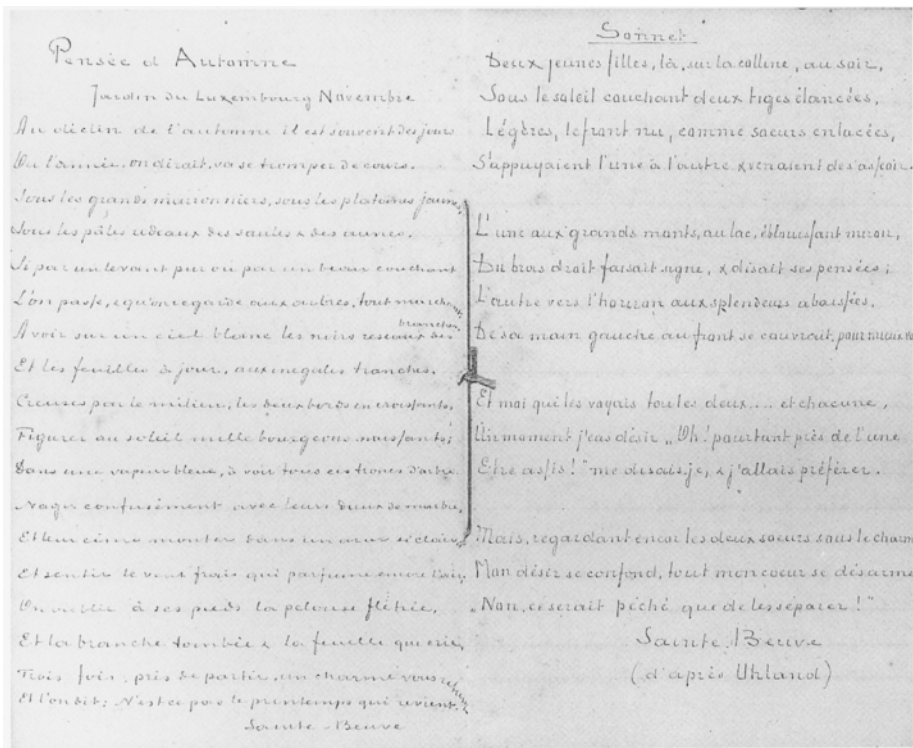
The literary environment in which Van Gogh grew up, which helped to form his mind and his view of art and the world, cannot be exactly defined. What did Van Gogh read during his childhood and adolescence? How did he read? Did he already possess a critical sense and have that frenzied enthusiasm that would mark his opinions on the texts he read as an adult? Does a primary text exist, a trigger, a particular author who directed him towards a particular intellectual, spiritual or artistic path before he even wrote the first known letter to Theo, which dates from 1872? There is no way of knowing.

From 1872 onwards, the future painter's correspondence provides many items of information about his literary taste, but it is very difficult to place exact dates on his reading before 1880, the year in which he began to give Theo regular reports of what he was reading. In order to discover the character of the literary landscape of his youth, we have only two indirect sources available, which offer an incomplete inventory of what Vincent read before his nineteenth year, and we have to make the uncertain assumption that what he mentions between his nineteenth and his twenty-seventh year represents what he had read and appreciated earlier. These sources are his letters and what have, slightly misleadingly, been called the *Poetry Albums* (ill. 2) – a compilation of all Van Gogh's 'unclassifiable' manuscripts.³¹ These consist of two literary albums composed for his young brother Theo; an album presented to the painter Mathijs Maris; the golden book of Annie Slade-Jones;³² and finally a series of texts considered unclassifiable at the time when the *Poetry Albums*, which were written or copied out by Vincent, were published.³³ Some of these texts resemble school exercises and consequently represent what Van Gogh either wanted or had to learn, and they are not necessarily characteristic of what he enjoyed reading.

Only one of these documents, which is undated and written in French, was unquestionably written by Vincent van Gogh.³⁴ This text, which is presented as the copy of a letter 'to Monsieur Jules Breton', clumsily recounts the story of a man

originally from Granville, who 'left for England' rather than stay in France, where his brothers had fallen out over their inheritance from their father. The man finds a wife in England, who gives him a daughter. 'After he had been married for 7 or 8 years, his chest complaint became worse.' His last wish was to see his homeland once more, and this was granted to him. 'And then he died.' [RM5] The story appears to be the work of a schoolboy; it is written with care and there are instances where the narrative is summarized. The date when this tale was written could consequently be well before 1872, but it is impossible to state this with certainty.

Jules Breton, the realist painter and poet, enjoyed great popularity during his lifetime. In his collection *Les champs et la mer* (1875), the author describes rustic scenes verging on the sugary sweet pastoral by means of a smooth technique and the extreme idealization of human traits, landscapes and situations. Breton, who



2. Vincent van Gogh, Two pages from the first *Poetry Album* for Theo van Gogh, 1870-75, with fragments of *Pensée d'automne* and *Sonnet* by Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Paris, 1845, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

liked to be known as the ‘peasant’ painter, was a conciliatory realist, who knew how to win the good graces of the official salons of the Second Empire and Third Republic. The young Van Gogh felt great admiration for him. In *Les champs et la mer*, which Vincent read, one poem entitled ‘Le soir’ contains several elements which may particularly have touched the young man:

In the light, in the distance, emerald clusters
 Help you make out the line of golden fields,
 And the sky, ablaze with a hue so warm,
 And the fallen sun which trembles in the reeds.

And then, in my tender soul, when I compare
 The site’s humility to its sublimity,
 An inspired frenzy takes possession of my mind,
 And I glimpse the hand divine.

It is nothing and it is everything. In creating nature
 God radiates everywhere the splendour of what he has made;
 If he provides the birds’ little ones with food,
 He lavishes beauty, that supreme blessing.³⁵

The poet’s ‘inspired frenzy’ is unleashed by comparing ‘the humility of the site to its sublimity’. In nature, divinity is manifested by the ‘splendour of what he has made’. In Van Gogh’s correspondence, these ideas would come back with great regularity, just as the fields of wheat, the birds and the sun would come back in his pictorial work. The basis of Van Gogh’s art would always be *nature*. Ambitions and pretensions would always be set against a never-ending search for humility and simplicity, the only means he could envisage for glimpsing the infinite – whether divine or humbly terrestrial in nature. Noting the presence of these elements in Vincent’s first literary sources forces us to put everything he read subsequently into perspective. The essence of what was to preoccupy Van Gogh during the last fifteen years of his life is already present in his first literary enthusiasms. Moreover, the text which best displays this is not a literary source but a literary *essai*, a declaration and not a summary of reading matter: in his intellectual development, Van Gogh follows a path whose trajectory is perhaps not defined in advance, but whose destination is fixed at a very early stage. Subsequently, no author, no literature will succeed in changing his direction radically, even if the interest and enthusiasm Vincent may show for certain authors displays, albeit temporarily, a real influence.

The reasons why Van Gogh wanted to write a letter to Jules Breton are unknown. Nevertheless, as he speaks about the protagonist of his mini-drama, he specifies:

He loved France, Brittany especially, and nature, and he saw God in it; for that reason you should mourn him as a brother.

In many aspects he was your brother, that is why I am telling you about the life of this 'stranger on the earth' who nevertheless was one of its true citizens.

Farewell, Sir, think of him sometimes. [RM5]

We do not know why or how this 'stranger on the earth' saw God in nature, but that is what made him one of Jules Breton's brothers in the eyes of the young Van Gogh. In pencil, Vincent adds that he has written the same letter to Alphonse Karr, in Nice, as well as to the writer Emile Souvestre, adapting the end of his letter to each of its recipients. If Van Gogh knew Karr's address, he was also aware of Souvestre's: he had died in 1854. This detail allows us to think that this letter was never sent; it may quite feasibly be a free, fictional essay in literary composition, set down on paper by a young Dutchman keen to improve his self-expression in written French. The theme which emerges from this text – that of the return to one's homeland, of rootlessness and nostalgia for the land of one's birth – is one of the favourite literary motifs in the earliest literary sources identified for Van Gogh.

Vincent did not know Granville, although he situated the main action of his story there. But he was very familiar with a text by Jules Michelet which describes this town and its surrounding area, and to which he returns in the first album he gave to his brother Theo. The seeds of the mixture that the future painter created of his personal impressions, the ethical imperatives and the literary sources he imposed on his correspondents can already be found in this first literary essay. With disarming ingenuousness, he decides that Breton is to be the brother of a fictitious character he has created, inspired by Michelet, and, without wasting any time on formalities, he takes up his pen to inform the interested party. Already we see the *necessity*, so characteristic of his personality, to transform the idea into action.

Another substantial source for reconstructing young Van Gogh's literary environment to the best of our ability – although it is indirect and second-hand – is the Van Gogh family's correspondence, which has been preserved by the Van Gogh Museum, and in which literature emerges as a favoured pastime, formative, strengthening and necessary. The Van Goghs took a portfolio of reading matter including several periodicals, some of them in French. These periodicals, which may have included *Illustration*, *Le Magasin Pittoresque* or *La Revue des Deux-Mondes*,

were likely to contain analyses, presentations and studies of texts of remarkable diversity. Vincent was brought up in a family in which literature was an integral part of daily life.³⁶ His father, a protestant pastor who belonged to a moderate wing of the church, held books in high esteem. From what we can gather, these books, whether religious or secular, were compatible with 'good morals', and very often had a moral value that conformed with a broad, simple principle: the love of one's fellow-man and of nature.³⁷ At that time, the Netherlands boasted a number of pastors who were authors, poets and translators, and who enjoyed great popularity, such as Eliza Laurillard or Jan ten Kate, who in particular had translated Hans Christian Andersen's *Picture-book without pictures*, and Goethe's *Faust* part I.³⁸ These works, which were given a Christian message in the process by the translator, had a considerable influence on Dutch literary culture, which the young Van Gogh could not have escaped.

Pastor Van Gogh was entrusted with a succession of ministries, although we cannot identify an ascending or descending movement in his career. He was a more or less missionary priest, relatively isolated in a Catholic area. Consequently, Vincent was the child of a religious minority, and the cultural influences of his immediate environment were necessarily minimal; he swam in a cultural microcosm – something that delighted him; he had a firm faith and he read what he had at his disposal with passion.

Naturally, the most important book in Vincent's literary environment was the Bible. The religious movement to which the Van Gogh family belonged was essentially evangelical, and among other things, was distinguished by a return to the text of the Gospels – an absolute, infallible constant that served as the basis for all debate about human existence and related areas. The scriptures were not only considered to be true in all respects, but above all to contain *all* truths. This return to the scriptures was accompanied by a focus on the individual, and it is without doubt this aspect that fundamentally differentiated the movement from Catholicism: faith was seen as a personal matter between God and the person who feared Him. Viewed from this point of view, no one can escape the omnipresent God, and the only way to attain the kingdom of heaven is to live as a perfect Christian throughout one's life; the mediation of a priest, a bishop or a pope cannot in any way influence a soul's destiny. Ecclesiastical structure, dogmas, and the form of the rite, are all secondary.³⁹ Every day throughout his entire childhood and adolescence, Van Gogh heard prayers, sermons and psalms devoted to this relationship of the individual with God, through the sole mediation of the Bible. This is where the future painter received his first intellectual training. The Word is sacred, and it is up to man to come to terms with it in order to lead his existence.

It is not known when, or how, Van Gogh learned the three foreign languages – German, English and French – that he mastered. He was sent to boarding school at the age of eleven, and when at the age of sixteen he took up employment with

the art dealers Goupil & Co., he undoubtedly had a good command of these languages. But Goupil & Co. were probably not content with the level he had attained. The training given by the firm must doubtless have been intended to strengthen this knowledge. Foreign literature would naturally have been a constituent part of this essential general education, but it is impossible to know what literary material Van Gogh encountered during these first years of professional apprenticeship. Nevertheless, even if he was offered a broader spectrum than that available at home, it is probable that there was no serious cultural break.

Pastor Van Gogh did not have the same income as his brothers, and although his position was undeniably dignified, it was not very enviable on a financial level. Conscious that they belonged to a respectable lineage,⁴⁰ the Van Goghs brought up their children with the greatest respect for middle-class conventions and made considerable efforts with regard to their education. Their children were destined for worthy careers and honourable occupations, and the paths of art dealer or pastor seemed favoured.⁴¹ Goupil & Co., with their international dealings and branches in Paris, London and The Hague, were well matched with the Van Goghs' social and cultural aspirations. Gaining – and continually maintaining – one's linguistic and cultural knowledge was one of the demands of the profession. Later on, Vincent van Gogh would openly complain about his parents' narrow-mindedness and more than once would feel misunderstood and unwanted. His judgements were harsh ones: his family's openness to the world, their solidarity and unity were undeniable. The solidarity, sympathy and openness that Theo showed by supporting Vincent both financially and morally for the decade from 1880 to 1890 was part of this.

The image that is invoked far too often of a hostile, narrow-minded family does not correspond to the facts.⁴² The family did not reject Vincent; on the contrary, they were constantly rescuing him. Vincent obtained his traineeship at Goupil & Co. through the mediation of one of his uncles, and he remained there for seven years. It was also thanks to family ties that he was able to take classes to prepare for the entrance examination to Amsterdam University. His father intervened in his favour in order to facilitate his short career as an evangelist. And once he had chosen the path of art, he would take lessons with the painter Anton Mauve, a cousin by marriage on his mother's side.

At the heart of Vincent van Gogh's social and family circle, which was united and open in the matter of his interests and was made up to a large extent of art dealers, artists and pastors, literature occupied a highly important place, as a true vantage point, binding and joining people together. For the young man, this was manna from heaven. Vincent adored reading and sharing what he read with his young brother and with his friends, just as he did with the art reproductions he collected.⁴³ The *Poetry Albums* are the reflection of this attitude, which often verges on intellectual proselytization. They represent a selection made by Van Gogh from

literature characteristic of his milieu, and they are highly predictable: German romanticism (Rückert, Heine, Uhland and Goethe); French romanticism (Musset, Sainte-Beuve and Lamartine); the unclassifiable Balzac and Hugo; English Victorian literature; a few thinkers such as Michelet, Renan and Carlyle; religious writings by Bossuet, Lamennais, Thomas à Kempis and Bunyan. This virtual library did not feature any great philosophers, and current affairs were notable by their absence. On the other hand, Andersen's *Tales*, translated into Dutch and Christianized by the pastor Ten Kate, and Michelet's 'poem of nature' (made up of *L'oiseau* [1856], *L'insecte* [1857], *La mer* [1861] and *La montagne* [1868]) featured in it prominently – literature that was easily accessible, enlightened without being complicated, often moralizing, authoritarian, dictating opinions rather than offering them. This unpretentious literary framework was that of the middle-class Dutch background Van Gogh came from, with no searching originality in its choices. In the early period, this was quite sufficient for the future painter, whose only ambition was to follow the way set out for him, pursuing his apprenticeship at Goupil & Co. without asking himself any other questions. Along with the Bible, this framework provided Van Gogh with his first literary enthusiasms, and it undoubtedly formed a frame of reference that would influence his relationship with the texts he was yet to discover.

The first poem we find in the *Poetry Albums* is 'L'héritier présomptif' by Joseph Autran. The work of Autran, simple, chaste and dull, was highly characteristic of what Van Gogh could encounter in the libraries of his father or his uncles. The work of this Christian academic, in love with the countryside and nature, perfectly matched what good Dutch society asked of French poetry: morality and common sense, of which Autran had an abundance, although no literary talent likely to make his work endure for posterity.

'L'héritier présomptif' is a moralizing poem dedicated to the newborn son of a peasant family. In it, Autran rather heavily stresses the need to prove worthy of one's forebears, whose forename one bears like an exacting, noble heritage. This was the case with Vincent, who, as was customary, bore the forename of his grandfather, and Theo, who bore the forename of his father. By copying out this poem for Theo's attention, at the beginning of the album, the attachment to family values is highlighted. The mediocrely crafted poem contains a large number of themes and ideas to which Van Gogh would remain faithful throughout his life: praise for simplicity and work, more specifically in a rural setting, in which the nourishing earth plays the leading part. In it, we also find the Christian image of the seed which must grow and bear fruit,⁴⁴ an image on which Van Gogh worked throughout his life with his paintings of sowers, harvests and wheatfields.

More moving and warmer are the two poems by Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, which Van Gogh copied out after filling fifteen pages with the works of Joseph Autran, 'Pensée d'automne' and a 'Sonnet'. The theme of autumn, a cliché of

romantic poetry, is used here by Sainte-Beuve to conjure up the illusory hope, the waking dream, the impossible promise of an immediate spring ... and the brief moment of happiness which such a reverie produces. The sonnet reproduced on the following page is framed as a similar reverie. Its subject is two young girls, with whom the author would like to share a moment of friendship; then he begins again, telling himself that he must not disturb this idyllic moment. The 'right to dream' contained in these poems, as the motif for a work of art, is characteristic of Van Gogh's pictorial work towards the end of his life; *The poet* (F 462 JH 1574), *La berceuse* (ill. 28) and *Starry night* (ill. 29) are also evocations, reveries, hopes.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, like Autran, Sainte-Beuve is representative of the tastes of the young Van Gogh, who during his years of artistic production made only a single reference to one of Saint-Beuve's declarations,⁴⁶ indicating no great interest in this poet.

The third and final author in the first album compiled for Theo is Jules Michelet, of whom Sainte-Beuve said: 'He's basically a flat character, as I've noticed in all those who are puffed-up.'⁴⁷ Van Gogh did not share this opinion, quite the contrary; he read and reread Michelet with an imperturbable enthusiasm. The passages he chose to copy out for his brother are extracts from *La mer* and *L'oiseau*. The first passage, drawn from *La mer*, is almost a prose poem, essentially descriptive, which relates a feeling of profound melancholy inspired by the sight of a coastal town, Granville, and its surroundings. Once again, a motif that would inspire Van Gogh at the end of his career as a painter is present. The Icelandic fishermen, who are the principal characters in Pierre Loti's novel *Pêcheur d'Islande* or Victor Hugo's *Travailleurs de la mer*, bring an essential contribution to the melancholy character of the town described by Michelet: 'I loved that curious and somewhat melancholy little town, which is supported by a distant fishery of a peculiarly dangerous kind.'⁴⁸ The sea, and the image of the lost fisherman, isolated in the middle of a hostile, frightening ocean, would hold Van Gogh's attention throughout his life. For example, in 1881, when he has been an artist for less than a year, he wrote to his friend Anthon van Rappard, by way of a prelude to announcing that he was to set up house with the former prostitute Clasina Hoornik:

A man can't stand it on the open sea for long – he has to have a little hut on the beach with a fire on the hearth – with a wife and children around that hearth.

You see, Rappard, where I myself seek to go, whither I seek to push others as well, is to become fishermen in the sea that we call the ocean of reality, but for myself, and for those fellow human beings I sometimes buttonhole, I definitely want 'that little hut' as well. And in that little hut the above-mentioned things. [190]

Later on, in Arles in 1888, when Van Gogh painted *La berceuse*, he thought of the deep-sea fishermen, torn between their love for the sea and their attachment to the land.⁴⁹

The second passage by Michelet that Van Gogh copied out, taken from *L'oiseau*, is a translation of a poem by Friedrich Rückert, entitled 'The swallow'. The link between German romantic poetry and the evangelism of the Groningen school,⁵⁰ both of which emphasized relationships between the individual, God and *nature*, in which various sensory and mystical epiphanies might occur, is here connected with the work of Michelet, who derived his material from the same romantic poems as Vincent, poems to which he would return in the second album he made for Theo. The poem by Rückert again deals with the question of nostalgia, which is the dominant theme of the album – on this occasion, nostalgia for past youth. The poet remembers the song of the swallow, which, after the winter, returned to the place of its birth, as he too returns to his home, mourning the days of yesteryear. This theme comes back again in the last extract copied out by Vincent, in which a caged swallow bitterly laments its loss of freedom. Towards the end of this passage, several elements have an impressively prophetic quality:

The lark's is the lyrical genius; the nightingale's, the epic, the drama, the inner struggle, – from thence, a light apart. In deep darkness, it looks into its soul, into love; soaring at times, it would seem, beyond the individual love into the ocean of love infinite.

And will you not call him an artist? He has the artist's temperament, and exalted to a degree which man himself rarely attains. All which belongs to it – all its merits, all its defects – in him are superabundant. He is mild and timid, mistrustful, but not at all cunning. He takes no heed to his safety, and travels alone. He is burningly jealous, equalling the chaffinch in fiery emulation. 'He will break his heart to sing,' says one of his historians. He listens; he takes up his abode, especially where an echo exists, to listen and reply. Nervous to an excess, one sees him in captivity sometimes sleeping long through the day with perturbing dreams; sometimes struggling, starting up, and wildly battling. He is subject to nervous attacks and epilepsy. [...]

Thus love and light are undoubtedly his point of departure; but art itself, the love of the beautiful, confusedly seen in glimpses, and very keenly felt, are a second aliment, which sustains his soul, and supplies it with a new inspiration. And this is boundless – a day opened onto the infinite.

The true greatness of the artist consists in overshooting his mark, in doing more than he willed; and, moreover, in passing far beyond the goal, in crossing the limits of the possible, and looking beyond – beyond.

Hence arise great sorrows, an inexhaustible source of melancholy; hence the sublime folly of weeping for misfortunes which he has never experienced. Other

birds are astonished, and occasionally inquire of him what is the cause of his grief, what does he regret. When free and joyous in his forest-home, he does not the less vouchsafe for his reply the strain which my captive chanted in his silence: 'Lascia che io pianga!' Suffer me, suffer me to weep!⁵¹

This passage disturbingly predicts the fate of the painter of the *Sunflowers*, who after presenting symptoms similar to epilepsy would be committed to an institution, and it also presents several factors fundamental to the way he behaved as an artist. 'Art itself, the love of the beautiful' are 'very keenly felt'. For Van Gogh, a work was just and beautiful when it was 'bien sentie' ('truly felt'),⁵² beyond, despite or in the absence of technical virtuosity. Nature, both in this passage and in the work of Van Gogh, is sufficient and necessary to enable one to glimpse *the infinite*, through suffering and melancholy, which are inseparable from the status of artist. The social environment, symbolized by carefree birds, who have no consciousness or knowledge, proves fatally uncomprehending, just like the people close to Vincent – with the exception of his brother Theo.

Van Gogh paraphrases this passage on a caged bird in a celebrated letter of 1880, the first one written in French, in which he announces that he has decided to launch himself on a career as an artist [155]. If Vincent does not refer to the little album he put together earlier, it is because the reference is so obvious that Theo has no need to be reminded of it. This appeal to their shared literary background, with no need to specify what is being referred to, is a sign of very great closeness that undeniably existed between the brothers, and it shows the status enjoyed by this literature, as a lasting storehouse and an unfailing communicator of shared impressions, opinions, judgements and feelings. Fieke Pabst notes that Vincent wrote towards the end of 1875: 'Shouldn't you get rid of those little books I wrote in for you?' [62]⁵³ Given that only two of these 'little books' now exist, it seems likely that these are the *Poetry Albums*. Chronologically, however, one is tempted to place the 'first album' in second position, since it has been stripped of the component about which Van Gogh said: 'You and I both liked the poems by Heine and Uhland, but watch out, old boy, it's pretty dangerous stuff. The illusion won't last long, don't surrender to it.' [62] Vincent preferred Michelet to Sainte-Beuve, and Zola to Coppée. The attachment to reality and to humility distanced him from romanticism, although he would never renounce this completely, wisely considering that there is some good in every movement – as long as one doesn't limit oneself to one alone.

The second album kept by Theo contains texts by an imposing list of authors: Jules Breton, Armand Silvestre, Jan van Beers, Sainte-Beuve, Musset, Carlyle, Michelet, Renan, Souvestre, Longfellow, Heine and Uhland, and it ends with a poem by Goethe. The first seven pages are not in Vincent's handwriting but in all likelihood Theo's. So this is not exactly a 'little book which I put together for you', but an album continued and completed by Vincent.

In any case, Vincent himself would not return to the 'pretty dangerous stuff, the illusion' constituted by the work of Uhland and Heine for a good twelve years, until the moment when he remembered, in the asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, that he had read and enjoyed Heine's *Reisebilder*. This long silence may be explained by the fact that Van Gogh wished, as he emphasized throughout his correspondence, to be 'of his time'. Romanticism, both German and French, belonged to another era, although he admired Delacroix, social commitment and the French revolutions, which were not 'of his time' either. In view of his knowledge of German language and culture, one might even have expected a few references to the Jung Deutschland movement, which shared this same fascination, but he never mentioned its existence. Perhaps it seemed to him to be an item of historical evidence to which it was not necessary to return, as well as something that had had no tangible sequel in the reality that preoccupied him at that time. However, Van Gogh's interest in the history of the 1789 Revolution was stimulated by, among others, the writings of Taine and of Michelet, which were still the authoritative works. The ideas of these thinkers had taken on a new meaning after the Second Empire was dismantled and the Third Republic established in 1870-71. It was the same with the works of Victor Hugo, in many respects comparable in form and content to the German romantics. But Hugo, who had been banished from the Second Empire, regained an undeniable relevance after his return from exile. Moreover, what fundamentally differentiates these French writers from the Germans is that the first are the ancestors of a more influential literary and pictorial actuality than the second, who are first and foremost *lyric* poets, a decidedly unfashionable genre, whose work is perfectly appropriate for an album of poetry put together for a close relative, but could not form the intellectual foundations of a young man who was thoroughly 'of his time'. Already, Van Gogh was sensitive not to art for art's sake, to a well shaped form, but to a well felt form, likely to contain an ethical dimension that was useful and applicable to his reality. He read for enjoyment, to learn and to improve himself. Ideally, these three aspects ought to be combined: learning useful things while undergoing a strong aesthetic experience. The problem that the German romantics posed him – and Heine is without a doubt the best example of this – was that only rarely did they contain a clearly expressed moral component, integral to the entire body of work, and this was a fault from which Victor Hugo's work, for example, did not suffer. During his troubled existence, Heine was constantly under threat, and had to weigh up the consequences of every word he used, risking the permanent loss of the patrons who ensured his economic survival. This cautiousness, as well as the way his ideas changed tack according to his situation, gave rise to a body of poetic work about which Van Gogh may have thought: 'the moral goal is not clear', a reproach he was to direct at his friend Emile Bernard when the latter sent him his poems in 1888.⁵⁴

The album given to the Dutch painter Mathijs Maris, whom Vincent greatly admired, is of little importance within the framework of this study. It simply testifies to Van Gogh's need to share his literary impressions. The composition of this anthology was a response to social rather than intellectual or artistic imperatives. Vincent certainly made a careful choice, but it is probable that he did not make this choice on the basis of his personal tastes; it is more likely that he tried to respond as best he could to Maris's tastes – if, that is, Van Gogh really intended it for him.⁵⁵ The album contains poems by Uhland, Heine and Goethe, as well as a tale by Andersen translated into Dutch. The reasons for this choice may be numerous. However, given that the painter would make no further reference to Heine for many years, the album for Mathijs Maris seems more representative of Van Gogh's literary *knowledge* than his tastes.

The literary fragments Van Gogh included in the golden book of Annie Slade-Jones, which is penned in four languages, and whose German passages are written in gothic script, strengthen – if there were any need so to do – the image of a pious young man, well educated, cultivated, with a good knowledge of modern languages ... and desirous of sharing his cultural knowledge. Hymns and psalms alternate with Michelet and Rückert, who have places of honour, without overshadowing a long extract from *Le conscrit* by Henri Conscience, consisting of the scene in which the young conscript bids a heart-rending farewell to his parents, his home and his childhood. One should also note the superb description by Emile Souvestre and extract from *Un philosophe sous les toits*, which ends with a reflection on humility: 'Whereas the joy of others embitters envious hearts, it strengthens submissive hearts. It is the ray of sunshine which brings those two beautiful flowers called *trust* and *hope* into bloom.'⁵⁶ We have to conclude that Vincent was very sensitive to texts dealing with attachment to the land of one's childhood. But the most striking trait in the passages Van Gogh copied out in this golden book is that they testify to an ever stronger religious commitment, which would lead him to want to become a pastor, in the image of his father. This vocation would bring about a final end to his childhood and to intellectual dependency; in attempting to walk in his father's footsteps, he discovered that his path was to be a different one.

A profound and original faith: Kempis, Bossuet, Bunyan, Fénelon and Renan

Christian literature, and first and foremost the Bible, had a considerable influence upon Vincent van Gogh. As a pastor's son, attracted to the written word, he avidly slaked his thirst on several masterpieces of Christian literature, including *The pilgrim's progress, from this world to that which is to come* by John Bunyan, and *The imitation of Jesus Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis. Less Christian in form, but equally

filled with Christian values is *Les aventures de Télémaque* by Fénelon, which also left an impression upon the young Van Gogh. As far as we can judge from the correspondence, between his seventeenth and twenty-third year, everything he heard, everything he saw, and all the events that punctuated his existence were interpreted according to a system of thought whose matrix is the Christian faith. This reading matter more or less constitutes a second stage in the evolution of his behaviour as a reader. In the first place, he was delighted to explore what his social milieu offered him. Once he no longer lived with his parents, he built up his own library, corresponding to his own preoccupations, of which the principal one is contained in the following sentence: 'Holding fast in all places and in all circumstances to the thought of Christ, that is a good thing.' [108]

The three titles mentioned above, by Bunyan, Thomas à Kempis and Fénelon, show straight away that Van Gogh did not limit himself to a fixed dogma or form of religion. However, they have certain points in common. One of the principal characteristics of the religious works mentioned by Van Gogh is that they position the relationship with God at the level of the individual, and highlight the fact that godliness is manifested by action, not just by contemplation, meditation or prayer. This is in fact the very essence of *Télémaque*, which makes it a work of an evangelical nature, in the sense that certain Protestants would understand it. *Télémaque* was written for the Duke of Burgundy, grandson of Louis XIV, in order to teach him the virtues and morality needed by a good monarch. Although the word 'Christ' is not used once in the book, Christian morality is nonetheless ever-present. Jupiter is the obvious embodiment of the Christian God, and Christian images are legion. Nevertheless, *Télémaque's* instructive virtues rather than its religious interest were undoubtedly the most important reason for Van Gogh reading it; he mentions it for the first time during his stay in Amsterdam, where he teaches himself the subjects which might eventually enable him to go to university. Van Gogh's major deficiency at that time seems to have been his lack of knowledge of Greek, Latin and antiquity in general. *Télémaque* is a perfect work for someone wishing to learn about the classical world and familiarize himself with its elements. But Fénelon's book is much more than a school text. It is above all the expression of an opinion by the author, who declares in it, in veiled terms, that inner spiritual life has precedence over adherence to dogmas. Mentor's words of wisdom teach Télémaque to trust his own judgement and urge him to forge his own opinion of what is good and bad. This aspect of *Télémaque* suited Van Gogh particularly well, and he applied the essence of this teaching to his *actual reading* of the book, as the following passage shows. It is taken from the twenty-fourth and last book, here 'quoted' by Van Gogh:

The man to whom he had by chance presented himself was a stranger, who had an air of majesty, and yet something that was sad and downcast; at times

he appeared dreamy, at others he had something that was either very determined or excited and agitated. At first he hardly listened to Telemachus's question, but at last he replied: You are not mistaken, Ulysses was received at the home of King Alcinous, as in a place where God is feared and hospitality is practised, but he is no longer there, and you would search for him in vain; he has departed for Ithaca, if indeed the angry Gods eventually permit him to see his household deities again. [...] The stranger who caused you such strong emotion is the great Ulysses. He is sailing straight to Ithaca, he is already very close to port, and at last he sees again those places so long yearned for. Your eyes saw him, but without knowing him; soon you will see him and you will know him – and he will know you, but now the Gods could not allow you to acknowledge each other, away from Ithaca. His heart was no less moved than yours; he is too wise to reveal himself to any mortal, in a place where he could be exposed to treachery. Ulysses, your father, is the wisest of all men; his heart is like a deep well, its secret could not be drawn from it. He loves truth, and never says aught that might wound it, but he speaks it only out of necessity, and wisdom, like a seal, ever keeps his lips closed to needless words. How moved he was when speaking to you! What violence did he do himself, so as in no wise to disclose himself! What did he not suffer, seeing you? That is what made him sad and downcast. [125]⁵⁷

This quotation is extremely truncated, and it seems impossible that Van Gogh could have found an edition of *Télémaque* that was so far distanced from the original. For example, the painter added to Fénelon's text 'at times ... at others he had something that was either very determined or excited and agitated.' Clumsy, artificial and ungrammatical, this addition could not be the work of a publisher anxious to clarify Fénelon's thinking. Van Gogh had no hesitation in altering the text and seems to have adapted the content to the ideas that excited him. He replaced 'a place where Jupiter is feared' in Fénelon's text by 'a place where God is feared'; he was so convinced – rightly – that this was an essentially Christian work, that he contaminated it with Christian elements. When the alteration was made and how it was done remains a mystery.

With a view to one day obtaining a post as a minister, Vincent attended as many services and Masses as possible, to imbue himself with God's word and the methods of preaching it. So he listened fervently to the message preached by the officiating priest, but also to the way in which this message was put across. Several times, Van Gogh mentions stylistic peculiarities of the sermons of one priest or another. Having seen his father prepare for services when he was younger, he knew the work in terms of the writing and knowledge that went into each sermon, and Van Gogh partially judged the success of a celebration of worship according to how successful it was as an exercise in style. In Amsterdam, in 1877, he wrote:

I then heard the Rev. Laurillard again in the early sermon on Jer. viii:7, Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming.

He told about how he had walked on a road where the leaves were already falling from the trees, and had seen a flock of migratory birds and spoke about the phenomenon of birds migrating, and how man will also migrate once to a warmer land. He treated this subject in the spirit of Michelet or Rückert, or as many have also painted it, including Protais, Souvenirs of the homeland. [131]

In England, taken under the wing of the Reverend Jones, he had an opportunity to compose a sermon himself, which he delivered in the chapel at Turnham Green, in Chiswick. The text, which is just a jumble of Biblical quotations, is known through a letter to Theo. This sermon, as well as the comments Van Gogh made on the services he attended, show that his passive English was very well-developed, and one of the consequences of his extreme faith was that he had a disproportionate knowledge of religious English. This proved extremely useful to him in understanding a book that he 'loved with all his soul': *The pilgrim's progress* by John Bunyan.⁵⁸ This book, made up of mystical evocations, is not only written in a style of English which could pose major difficulties to a Dutchman, but it is also made up of complex allegorical images, which are far from easily accessible. One might be tempted to believe that Van Gogh was unable to grasp all its subtleties, but the deep and ecstatic mysticism in which Bunyan's masterpiece is bathed undoubtedly suited the young zealot perfectly and broke down the language barriers that separated him from an adequate understanding of the text. However, Van Gogh entered into details of the book's content only once,⁵⁹ which is astonishing for a work he 'loves with all his soul'. His future love for writers like Zola, Daudet or Maupassant was to be translated into a considerable number of references, but for Bunyan, there are only six. However, the theme of the book was central to his religious preoccupations. This paradoxical situation may be explained by the fact that Van Gogh wrote that he had written a summary of the book,⁶⁰ although the interest of *The pilgrim's progress* resides not in the action but in the deep thinking induced by the allegories that are put forward. It was not the problem of understanding Bunyan's language that made him produce this summary, but apparently a problem in understanding the ideas and images put forward in the work. Van Gogh needed simple ideas that he could apply; Bunyan's text did not conform to this requirement. In summarizing the text, Van Gogh simplified it, and it is likely that this simplification was accompanied by various transformations. In this way, rather than being influenced by the text, Van Gogh appropriated it and changed its nature – as he did in quoting the passage from *Télémaque*.

In September 1877, while he was preparing for the University entrance examination, Van Gogh launched into a complete handwritten copy of *The imitation of*

Jesus Christ by Thomas à Kempis (which has not been preserved). The fact that he read and adored *The imitation* is in itself highly significant. This austere text is a long incitement to contrition, to penitence and to self-giving. One of the main ideas Van Gogh retained from Christianity and from the Christian texts he read, was that in Jesus everything is new. This redemption, offered through the Passion because of the sacrifice of God's only son, was in Van Gogh's eyes the ultimate consolation. And one was doing God's work by giving or receiving this consolation, which still existed among mankind – as proof of Christ's life and the essence of the Christian faith.

Van Gogh read *The imitation* in a French translation. Numerous translations and countless editions of this work were in circulation at that time, but it is probable that, among others, he read the edition by Lamennais, the most widespread and most modern translation. Lamennais provided each chapter of his translation of *The imitation* with a 'Reflection', doubtless to help the reader grasp the essence of the words. This was not to Van Gogh's taste, and in February 1883 he declared:

And the reading MICHELET himself regards as desirable for a woman is The Imitation of Jesus Christ by Thomas à Kempis – the original version, of course, not the botched one that the clergy distorted.

But you probably know more about French literature than I do. The book by Thomas à Kempis is as beautiful as, for example, Ary Scheffer's *Consolator*; it's something one can't compare to anything else. But I've seen editions of it that were wholly and deliberately distorted and altered by having a horrible sort of explanation added to each chapter. I still have one myself that I was once tricked into buying. [316]

It is unlikely that Van Gogh was referring here to Lamennais's Reflections, which were perfectly compatible with his preoccupations. Thus, in book 4, chapter 8, Lamennais writes:

We would have but a feeble, very incomplete idea of the sacrifice of the Cross, if we saw in it only that which appears, so to speak, to the senses. Jesus Christ did not only offer his sacred body, subject to all the sufferings and all the anguish that human nature may endure, but also his holy soul, closely united with the divine Word, all his pains, all his affections, all his wishes, and the agony and abandonment which tore from his heart that last cry: *My God, why hast thou forsaken me?* In that state, he represented the whole of humanity, which is condemned to die; and the man was indeed struck down by death, down to the most secret depths of his being. Then, *all was accomplished*, both torture and redemption.

Now, each time the priest steps up to the altar and, according to the divine institution, renews this ineffable sacrifice; each time that the worshipper participates in the immolated victim, and both worshipper and priest must offer themselves as Jesus Christ offered himself; their sacrifice, united with his, must be like his, unreserved; for we too are bound to the Cross, and with Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ we suffer for ourselves, for our brothers, for the living, for the dead, for the whole great human family; which makes the apostle St Paul utter these astonishing words: *I rejoice in my sufferings because of you; and what the Passion of Jesus Christ lacks, I accomplish in my flesh, for his body, which is the Church*; not, no doubt, that the Saviour's Passion was less than superabundant in taking away the sin of the world, and satisfying God's justice, but because each of us must reproduce it within ourselves, and because, *being the members of one body, which is the body of Christ*, everything we suffer, he suffers with us, so that our sufferings become, as it were, a part of his Passion proper.

O Jesus! I offer myself with you, I offer my whole self; here I am upon the altar; strike, Lord, carry out the sacrifice; destroy everything in me that belongs to the condemned man, those earthly desires, those affections, those wishes, those senses which trouble me, this sinful body, and, with my eyes fixed on your Cross, I shall say: *All is accomplished!*⁶¹

Not only does this text advocate absolute devotion to Christ, just as it was found in Van Gogh, but it also deals specifically with the themes that were at the centre of his religious motivations. The references one encounters here are those to which Vincent constantly referred: the union of bodies, sacrifice, and above all joy in suffering, an idea that touched the very core of his being. Van Gogh read and admired Lamennais, and was probably referring to another author when he declared that he had been swindled when he bought a copy of one of the numerous editions and translations of the *Imitation*.

Nowadays, Lamennais is classified among the 'Christian socialists'. Van Gogh, whose ideas agreed to a large extent with those of Lamennais, could not however be considered a Christian socialist. He was a practising Christian until his twenty-seventh year, but there is no indication that he ever seriously upheld any such social theory. He saw beauty at the heart of the working classes as the Goncourt brothers viewed them: motifs that were attractive because of their veracity, their suggestive power; but he absolutely did not feel pity for the fate of the less fortunate, did not suggest that the society of his time was unjust, and still less aimed to glorify the poor and the oppressed. This is perhaps why he would prefer Zola to Hugo, why his reading of the Enlightenment authors would be limited to *Candide*, and why his political opinions, in this stormy era, would be limited to a certain fascination for the Marseillaise, which his friend the republican 'postman' Roulin

would sing in front of him. Van Gogh was compassionate to a measured degree, benevolent and distant towards those close to him, and had a pronounced taste for suffering. What was the good of hoping for the end of suffering, since it is suffering which enables us to be reborn in Jesus Christ, to follow his example and become a true Christian? Van Gogh's active evangelism was in the same area, that of 'primitive' Christians: he sought to support the unfortunate by helping them to understand the meaning of their suffering. But Van Gogh never hoped that the poor would become less poor, or the rich less rich. 'The first shall be last'; the last should rejoice in their suffering: a new life awaited them after death.

Nowhere in his correspondence did the man from Brabant give a clear definition of what he understood by the 'living Christ', whom he was searching for by imitating his example. Like the majority of his key ideas, Van Gogh's 'living Christ' can only be analyzed from an idiosyncratic angle. The doctrines of the evangelistic movement his father embraced are only of limited help in understanding it, since Vincent took many liberties with religious dogmas. Certain texts he consulted and claimed to admire, by Renan or Michelet for example, were in complete contradiction to his father's religious opinions. Whereas the evangelicals believed in the absolute infallibility of the Holy Scriptures, Renan showed in an in-depth, authoritative study, *La vie de Jésus*, that the Gospels do not contain all of the truth, and that everything they contain is not true. Van Gogh read *Jésus*, the watered-down version of this book, from which Renan had extracted everything that might shock readers who were believers. *Jésus* however remains a perfect refutation of any blind belief in the four Gospels. The anti-clerical and critical impact of books like *La vie de Jésus* or *Des jésuites* by Michelet and Edgar Quinet may have induced a desire in Vincent, in 1877, to rid himself of all the works he possessed by these authors. He urged Theo to do the same, but would soon regret it, and he asked Theo to send him back the Michelet texts he had got rid of. Nevertheless, between 1876 and 1880, that is to say between the ages of 22 and 27, his reading matter remained almost entirely determined by his faith.

Knowledge of Dutch art through French authors: Thoré and Fromentin

In 1873, Van Gogh first mentioned the book *Musées de la Hollande* by Théophile Thoré,⁶² but it is likely that he knew this work a good deal earlier. At the start of 1874, after mentioning the work a second time, he wrote: 'Burger is simpler and everything he says is true.' [19] Ten years later, in 1884, Van Gogh asked Theo to send him all the good books he comes across 'such as Fromentin's book on Dutch painters' [450]. In the same year, his correspondence with his friend and colleague Anthon van Rappard shows that the two painters exchanged this type of book.⁶³



3. Théophile Thoré, photograph
by Félix Nadar, 1876

The fact that Van Gogh learned about Dutch painters through French authors is finally confirmed by a passage in a letter of July 1888 to his colleague Emile Bernard, which was to be his last reference to Thoré: 'Anyway, I know, Rembrandt and the Dutch are scattered around museums and collections, and it's not very easy to form an idea of them if you only know the Louvre. 'However, it's Frenchmen, C. Blanc, Thoré, Fromentin, certain others, who have written better than the Dutch on that art' [650].

Beyond the factual information contained in these authors' writings, Van Gogh was very sensitive to the opinions he found in them. Well before discovering Zola's Naturalism, Vincent discovered Thoré's conclusion in his *Musées de la Hollande*:

Dutch art, with its *naturalism* as people like to call it, is therefore unique in modern Europe. It is the indication of an art inspired entirely differently from the mystical art of the Middle Ages, the allegorical and aristocratic art of the Renaissance, which is still continued in contemporary art. The art of Rembrandt and the Dutch is quite simply art for mankind.⁶⁴

Van Gogh stands in this tradition of Dutch art. A kind of art designed for ordinary people, responding to a commercial demand rather than produced to please at the government's instigation; a kind of art which fits into society in a natural way, rather than being artificially fashioned in the hope of winning a Salon medal; a democratic kind of art, representative of the spirit of the time and of the common people from whom these artists have come, through its subjects, themes and execution.

According to Fromentin, Dutch painting of the seventeenth century has the following character: 'The moment was come to think less, to aim less high, to look at things closer, to observe better, to paint just as well but otherwise. It was the painting of the crowd, of the citizen, the working-man, of the first and last comer, entirely made of him and for him. It was now a question of becoming humble when dealing with things humble, small for things small, subtle for things subtle, of gathering them all in without omission or disdain, of entering familiarly into their intimacy, affectionately into their manner of being; it is a matter of sympathy, of attentive curiosity, of patience.'⁶⁵

Throughout his career as an artist, Van Gogh demonstrated his attachment to the values and principles observed in the work of the Dutch masters by Fromentin and Thoré. Simplicity, humility, empathy with the subject, and *art for the people* are elements also found in his works, his letters and in the testimonies of his contemporaries. His family environment and his first choice of career rendered this reading matter, which considerably influenced and shaped his tastes, practically obligatory. Nevertheless, we must note that his first remark on Thoré, 'everything he says is true', presupposes that Van Gogh has a very clear idea of what is false; in other words, at the age of nineteen he judged Thoré's work by setting it against his pre-existing cultural baggage. Thoré was not only a discovery in his eyes, but also a confirmation. It is impossible to know exactly what the young Van Gogh may have read about art and the history of art before 1872, but Thoré was to remain his favourite author on the art of Holland's golden century – a tradition in which he did not seek to position himself, but which was definitely a part of his identity.

2

Body and soul

Van Gogh grew up in the country. Work in the fields occupied a large part of his childhood and adolescent escapades. It is not a matter of chance that Van Gogh felt, and would always feel, 'at home' wherever this work went on. He would refer to this heritage right to the dramatic end of his life, characterizing himself as a child of the earth which watched him grow up.⁶⁶ To this fundamental rural identity, we must add ever-present religion, which shaped and influenced his mind. It would prove sufficiently flexible to adapt to his own changing realities, but would retain a structure and values quite similar to those that became his own at the parsonage in the village of Groot-Zundert. However, if the physical and spiritual context may explain why the future painter would feel most at ease painting rural, working-class scenes, the intensity of the emotions that flooded into him cannot be explained except by his own character traits, in which his originality resides: he was more enthusiastic than other men; he was intransigent about his beliefs to an extreme degree; in short, he was driven by a burning desire to achieve 'something' through *work* and *humility*.

In 1880, Van Gogh wrote: 'I, for one, am a man of passions, capable of and liable to do rather foolish things for which I sometimes feel rather sorry.' [155] The future painter undoubtedly used the word 'passions' in the plural in order to express the different centres of interest he had nurtured, in painting and literature as well as in the vast religious material he had explored. But the plural of the word as applied to Vincent also implies different meanings: passion is also *suffering*. This ambivalence expresses his inner world well: it describes the intensity with which Van Gogh experienced the events that punctuated his life, as well as the very nature of those events. Moreover, suffering was an integral part of the battles Van Gogh fought. Whether he wanted to become a pastor, an evangelist, an illustrator or painter, each of these enterprises was characterized by an intense, taxing struggle, whose conditions were systematically subordinated to whatever was at stake.'

Favourite themes: faith, simplicity, the earth, work, the homeland

At the height of his religious mania, Van Gogh was not just a blind believer exclusively preoccupied with religious matters, although he did venture a long way into this terrain. He had his own sensibility, his own points of reference, and he exhibited a great attachment to certain values that recur in his correspondence, which are often compatible with Christianity and can be regarded as his favourite themes.

The first of these values is *simplicity*. In this respect, he followed a recommendation given to us by Luke in the Gospels: 'The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness.'⁶⁷ The first literary reference in the correspondence, a poem by Jan van Beers, which Van Gogh copied out, already contains this fundamental element of Vincent van Gogh's thinking.

From behind the bushes the painter, silently smiling, saw
The hurly-burly twist and turn, further ahead on the bumpy road.
'Yes, he whispered to himself, yes, these sounds must be
Sweet to the Lord, these joyful shouts with which these hearts,

Pour out their gratitude, so simply, gleaning the last
Fruits, which must be ripened each year by their heavy toil.
Yes, for the most beautiful prayer of simplicity and innocence is joy!' [10]⁶⁸

Two years later, in Paris, Van Gogh quoted the Gospels again: 'let us ask that our eye may become single, for then we shall be completely single.' [49]⁶⁹ When we look at Van Gogh's literary panorama as a whole, if, for example, we use Pabst and Van Uiter's list,⁷⁰ we cannot help noting that it contains very few authors who present real difficulties of comprehension or accessibility. We may even note that the painter has a tendency to prefer works which combine depth and simplicity, such as Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's cabin*, Voltaire's *Candide* or *Tartarin de Tarascon* by Daudet. It is also significant that Van Gogh does not mention *A rebours*, by Joris-Karl Huysmans, an author he says he admires and whose *En ménage* he read. He must surely have had an opportunity to read *A rebours*,⁷¹ which caused quite a stir in Van Gogh's time; but we must allow that this work might prove totally indigestible to someone with no interest in minerals, in authors who express themselves in Latin, tropical plants, or, especially, in the extreme experimentation of a degenerate, misanthropic dandy. Simplicity, subject obviously to great subjectivity, seems therefore to be a value that had a considerable influence upon Van Gogh's literary choices.

The second fundamental theme is the *earth*. Van Gogh's attachment to his native earth was very great, as numerous authors have already emphasized. And his work

alone offers sufficient evidence of this: the earth is an omnipresent element in his drawings and paintings, from Nuenen to Auvers, in the form of mud on worn-out shoes or beneath the blades of the plough. Furrows, fields of potatoes, vines, wheatfields ... of all the different aspects of rural life, it was the earth that preoccupied him the most. Nevertheless, we should note that Van Gogh never dissociated the earth from the peasant's *work*, nor from the notion of his *country*.

In his first letter in French, he took up Souvestre again: 'You'll find in Souvestre's *Le philosophe sous les toits* how a man of the people, a simple workman, very wretched, if you will, imagined his mother country' [155]:

'Perhaps you have never thought what your country means,' continued he, placing his hand on my shoulder; 'it is all that surrounds you, all that has brought you up and fed you, all that you have loved! This country that you see, these houses, these trees, those girls who go along there laughing – this is your country! The laws which protect you, the bread which pays for your work, the words you interchange with others, the joy and grief which come to you from the men and things among which you live – this is your country! The little room where you used to see your mother, the remembrances she has left you, the earth where she rests – this is your country! You see it, you breathe it, every where! Think to yourself, my son, of your rights and your duties, your affections and your wants, your past and your present blessings; write them all under a single name – and that name will be your country!'⁷²

A few months earlier, he had quoted Fénelon: 'Mentor says, "The earth is never ungrateful, she always nourishes with her fruits those who cultivate her with care and with love, she denies her goods only to those who fear giving her their hard labour."' [126] Work, the earth and one's country thus appear as a single, indisociable whole. These three elements are predominant constituent parts of his identity. Work as the engine, the earth as a subject, and the country as a reference. In order to become an evangelist, a pastor, a graphic artist or a painter, he believed only in progress through effort, self-denial and exceeding one's own capabilities. The fact that this work might be accompanied by great suffering posed no problems for Van Gogh. Faithfully following Paul's advice,⁷³ he rejoiced in this suffering, which alone could lead him to 'outgrow vulgarity', as Renan required.⁷⁴

The theme of *nature* in Van Gogh's work, which is often discussed, and is ever-present in his work and his correspondence, is rarely virgin nature. Human activities or traces of these activities generally play the principal role. As far as Vincent was concerned, the observation of nature could be used to serve a higher goal than simple appreciation. The start of a letter written in September 1875 is explicit on this subject: 'Feeling, even a fine feeling, for the beauties of nature isn't the same as religious feeling, although I believe that the two are closely

connected.’ [49] Later, when his passion for the word of God had already made Vincent realize that his days as a Parisian white-collar worker were numbered, he wrote: ‘You’ll surely see many beautiful things on your trip; although a feeling for nature isn’t *it*, it’s nonetheless a wonderful thing to have; may it always remain with us.’ [72] As Stolwijk remarks, by declaring that a feeling for nature is not ‘*it*’, Van Gogh took away from nature the absolute quality which he conferred upon faith.⁷⁵ Any statement that these two realities are mingled in Van Gogh’s work, although not without foundation, must also be advanced with caution. The young zealot was sensitive to nature, and there is no doubt that he saw the work of God in it, and consequently *the infinite*. But it would be astonishing if a pastor’s son who had grown up in a rural, wooded environment thought any differently. And most importantly, there is no really solid evidence to establish a stronger link than that which any reasonably sensitive believer feels when he gazes upon nature.

Another theme that Van Gogh particularly liked, and which is also linked to work, the earth and his country, is the *sea*. Fishermen, boats and ships – Christian themes par excellence but ones that also inspire secular authors – crop up regularly in the works he read, especially towards the end of his life. This taste for all things maritime is already present in the *Poetry Albums*,⁷⁶ and it appears, for example, in a letter written from London, in which he quoted verses from two different poems by Edmond Roche taken from his *Poésies posthumes*:

Sad and alone, I climbed the sad, bare dune,
Where the sea keens its ceaseless moaning plaint,
The dune where dies the wide unfurling wave,
Drab path that winds and winds upon itself again.⁷⁷

And:

How I love to see you once again, o my native town,
Dear sea nymph seated at the waters’ edge! [...]
I love the soaring spire of your bell-tower,
Lovely in its boldness and its elegance,
Its fretted cupola, through which we see the sky. [32]⁷⁸

In the first extract, the parallel with the calvary of human existence is obvious. The path which leads to God is a narrow one ... The second extract takes up the idea of nostalgia for the place of one’s birth, for the earth, one’s country, which returns so often in Van Gogh’s work that – without launching into a sterile psychological analysis – one may see it as an indication that Van Gogh already felt he was *rootless*. This is hardly surprising: the number of times he moved home, set up home and departed is remarkable. His wanderings began when he was eleven years old,

when he was sent to boarding school. At sixteen he left for his apprenticeship in The Hague, and he was to change his address again some twenty-five times before his death at the Auberge Ravoux in Auvers-sur-Oise at the age of thirty-seven. This same theme is also present in his *Sunflowers*, as has been shown by Kōdera and Druick and Zegers,⁷⁹ and in *La berceuse* – which is also the title of a sonnet by Edmond Roche (appearing in the same *Poésies posthumes* as the two stanzas quoted above), the final lines of which clearly announce what was in store for the future painter:

Berceuse

Silence! The child is sleeping ...! On his scarlet lips
His divine smile has scarcely faded;
The mysterious horde of enchanting dreams, filled with divine marvels,
Has slipped onto his brow

What can you dream of, when you doze,
Heart of gold which no disastrous care has touched?
Of what can you dream? Of your mother who watches,
And whose tender song has suddenly ceased.

Sleep, little cherub, angel with closed eyelids;
Enjoy this moment of calm as you repose
Without anxious remorse, without stifling grief!

Alas! too soon for you, love and genius
Will afflict you with their burning insomnia,
And you will sadly miss your sweet childhood sleep.⁸⁰

The profession of faith

At the moment when his desire to become a pastor was at its height, Vincent's religious themes and obsessions were all present in a crucially important letter in which he sent Theo a prayer, which he presented with the words, 'Wrote something for us last night.' [104] This 'something' is in fact a text of more than 3,900 words, and we may wonder at the length of the evening Van Gogh spent composing it.

Here is a summary of the prayer's content: We are the two brothers, children of many prayers, who have spent much time together in our father's house. We admire your creation and we trust in you. But the contemplation of your creation

is not enough to console us. The light we need is not that of the sun, nor that of the stars, but that of the spirit and the emotions which were within Jesus Christ: the love of you, of Christ, and of the next in Him; the light of a love which can drive one and light a fire of zeal in the heart. We want to work for that which is imperishable. What must we do to be saved? Believe in God, and we shall be saved. We are surrounded by temptations of all kinds. Deliver us from evil, we cannot face the temptations without your help. Help us to fear you. You know that we love your word with a sweet and ancient feeling; we believe that the heavens and the earth will perish but that your words will not perish. We know also that not a single hair from our heads will fall unless you wish it. We are poor and filled with sadness. You sent us your only son to give us eternal life. He who does not know love does not know you, for God is Love. And there is no fear in love because love drives away fear. Teach us to understand the words of Christ. Give us your love and we shall be consoled. May the experience of life make us simple, make us adore you in spirit and in truth. May our love for you drive us to seek your words zealously and ensure that sadness towards God brings us to the choice without regrets, the choice of salvation. Your word is a light that guides us. In you all things can become new. We think we desire something good when we pray to you to place a ring on our finger at the moment you choose and make us meet the woman who will make us husbands and fathers. When we were children we prayed to you like children; now we are adults we pray as adults. Make us saddened yet still joyful Christians.⁸¹

All the young zealot's obsessions are dealt with: simplicity, zeal, humility; nature, which is insufficient to fill this heart that desires the absolute; the need for a word to guide him, for consolation through communion; the omnipotence of Providence; the wish to become 'sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing';⁸² the belief that, without asking Theo's opinion, this prayer represents both brothers' gratitude and requests; finally, and in particular, the application of all his ideas to an extremely prosaic daily life, in a perfectly pragmatic way: the desire to find a wife.

Dying to oneself

Van Gogh preferred actions to ideas, and it was not rare to see him act before thinking; something that did not prevent him retrospectively justifying even his most impulsive actions. This need for action is an essential constant, which is found just as much in his ecclesiastical aspirations as it is, later on, in his activity as a painter. The means he possessed in order to bring his plans to fruition were a great capacity for work, based on an inclination for self-denial, and an uncommon degree of humility. A thought by Renan, which Van Gogh copied out, is a perfect illustration of this attitude:

To act in the world one must die to oneself. The people that makes itself the missionary of a religious thought no longer has any other country than that thought.

Man is not placed on the earth merely to be happy; nor is he placed here merely to be honest. He is here to accomplish great things through society, to arrive at nobility, and to outgrow the vulgarity in which the existence of almost all individuals drags on. [33]⁸³

‘One must die to oneself’ is the first fundamental element of this quotation, which became almost a motto for Van Gogh. Not that he repeated these words over and over again; but he always plunged headlong into any enterprise with total abandon, neglecting his immediate interests – which might have made his existence more tolerable – and preferring instead loftier prospects. ‘Man [...] is here to accomplish great things through society, to arrive at nobility, and to outgrow [...] vulgarity.’ There is a hierarchy of interests here, which was the source of many misunderstandings and conflicts with those close to him. In the first place, his family were astonished at the extreme measures taken by the young zealot; and with the exception of his brother Theo, the attitude manifested towards him by those who came into contact with him while he was painting was characterized – at best – by a distant and anxious sympathy when faced with so much enthusiasm.

The second fundamental element of Renan’s quotation is the notion of *the country*, to which Van Gogh would devote much thought throughout his life. Renan associated this notion with *thinking*, which, in the case of Van Gogh during his years of religious fervour, was broadly conditioned by the faith that energized him. A stateless person par excellence, the painter found in this approach an opportunity to see his country ‘every where’, in the words of Souvestre. Since he could not take his country with him, he would guard its memory preciously; the earth was an idea, which he recognized around him, invariably producing a feeling of profound nostalgia. It was not the land of his childhood village, Groot-Zundert, which he was to retain in a corner of his mind until the end of his days, but a certain idea of that land. Thus, in June 1880, when he took the decision to devote his life to art, he wrote: ‘So instead of succumbing to homesickness, I said to myself, one’s country or native land is everywhere. So instead of giving way to despair, I took the way of active melancholy as long as I had strength for activity, or in other words, I preferred the melancholy that hopes and aspires and searches to the one that despairs, mournful and stagnant.’ [155]

Van Gogh’s life was a life of *passion*, in the first place because the painter never stopped imposing suffering upon himself: physical, intellectual and spiritual. The engine driving this extreme attitude was a simple, purblind ‘collier’s faith’,⁸⁴ first of all in Jesus, then later on in art. Literary and religious texts provided him with malleable material in order to check, experience, apply, justify and share this faith.

Van Gogh's passion fed on literature and was enlivened by it. The mechanism of this vital recourse to literature finds its example and its source in Van Gogh's relationship to the text that was instilled in him from his earliest years by his family environment, and by his father in particular: the application to human existence of the Bible, in which the example of 'dying to oneself', of a man's sacrifice for the good of humanity, is given more than once.

'Dying to oneself' took on a particular dimension during Van Gogh's first stay in Paris, from May 1875 to March 1876. Twenty-two year-old Vincent, who was consumed by religious fire as never before, placed himself entirely in the hands of God and abandoned the idea of dealing in art. On 6 October 1875, he quoted an English hymn, one verse of which characterizes his attitude at this time remarkably well:

Thy way not mine, o Lord
 However dark it be,
 Lead me by thine own hand
 Choose out the path for me.⁸⁵

Van Gogh was withdrawing in favour of divine Providence. And he accepted unflinchingly whatever difficulties his destiny might have in store for him, since sufferings and misfortune were in effect promises of salvation, once the kingdom of God has been established. Feverish and enthusiastic, Van Gogh ended his letter with a significant postscript:

Does the road go uphill then all the way?
 'Yes to the very end'.
 And will the journey take all day long?
 'From morn till night, my friend.' [54]⁸⁶

Van Gogh rejoiced at the prospect of the 'road which goes uphill all the way'. Self-denial, resignation and suffering were the conditions necessary to turn life into a noble battle filled with potential, leading to the sublime and to what he constantly called 'it'. Consequently, each difficulty encountered was a source of comfort, since it is through suffering that one meets the consolatory Christ. This thought is also found in Musset's work, which Van Gogh liked:

Man is an apprentice, pain is his master
 And no man knows himself as long as he has not suffered.⁸⁷

Vincent was perpetually searching his soul. He was a humble young man, not very sure of himself, the opposite of an arrogant or conceited man, or a poseur. The



4. George Henry Boughton, *Godspeed! Pilgrims setting out for Canterbury*, 1874, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

texts that nourished and strengthened his ideas, providing justifications for each of his decisions, constituted his intellectual framework and gave him theoretical support. At the moment when he decided to become an artist, five years later in 1880, he wrote: 'For example, to name one passion among others, I have a more or less irresistible passion for books, and I have a need continually to educate myself, to study, if you like, precisely as I need to eat my bread.' [155]

The vital part of this declaration is his 'need to educate himself'. His passion for books was directed by the need to learn. A little further on, to illustrate this fact, he wrote that he had 'studied more or less seriously' the Bible, Shakespeare, Hugo, Michelet, Dickens and Beecher Stowe. If the teachings offered by the Bible and Michelet need no explanation, learning is less obvious in the reading of Shakespeare, Hugo, Dickens and Beecher Stowe, unless he was elaborating their moral importance and considered that edification was worth as much as instruction. Van Gogh was probably referring to *Le dernier jour d'un condamné*, *A Christmas carol* and *Uncle Tom's cabin*, three accessible works whose noble message comes through in every line. Clearly, Van Gogh was not reading *solely* in order to educate himself, but also for enjoyment, and to satisfy his need to read well written books, well constructed stories, descriptions that were detailed and well 'felt'. The moral value of a work was thus a necessary but insufficient condition to form

part of the painter's choice of literature. This mixture of interests would make him say that he wished to know the Bible 'by heart',⁸⁸ through *love* and *respect* for the word – a courageous plan, which he would never bring to fruition.

Vincent tried to find himself during these vagabond years. As he emphasized later in the famous letter that marked his conversion to art and the start of Theo's patronage: 'one of the reasons why I'm now without a position, why I've been without a position for years, it's quite simply because I have different ideas from these gentlemen who give positions to individuals who think like them.' [155] The aspiring artist was aware that he did not think as other people do. His thoughts were unusual and, obstinately, he would not suffer them to be called into question by any other individual. Using the model provided by his father – the pastor who had a text at his disposal to explain or comment upon all possible situations – he built himself a method of setting reality against text, the result of which was invariably conditioned by the thought that inspired him at the start. The mechanism was simple and effective, and it is borne out throughout the correspondence. As soon as a difficult situation presented itself, Van Gogh hid behind great names to which his detractors could never compare themselves. The text was an absolute value, infinitely superior to Man – who could only serve as an example through the grace of the written word; or rather, did not truly gain access to Vincent's pantheon unless he had *become* the written word. Thus, it is not surprising to note that the adoration Van Gogh felt for Jesus, for Millet, even for Delacroix, would arise or develop only through the medium of texts. It was also through the writings of great French art critics like Théophile Thoré and Eugène Fromentin that Van Gogh obtained information and informed his correspondents about his compatriots Rembrandt, Vermeer, Ruysdael and Hobbema. Van Gogh demanded this recourse to the written word when he advised Theo: 'So stick to your own ideas, and if you doubt the goodness of them, test them against those of him who dared to say "I am the truth", or against those of some humane person, such as Michelet.' [28]

Unconditionality

In 1875, Vincent was still working at Goupil & Co. He was sharing a room in Montmartre with his colleague and friend Harry Gladwell. He introduces this eighteen-year-old Englishman (Vincent was then twenty-two) in a letter dated 11 October 1875. He mentions that they read the Bible aloud, every evening, and that they intend to read it in its entirety. Then he gives an account of a visit they paid together to the Musée du Luxembourg, where they admired, among other things, canvases by Millet, Jules Breton and Daubigny. The titles of some of the paintings speak volumes: *The blessing of the corn in Artois* by Breton; *The church at*

Gréville by Millet (ill. 5); *Christ on the Mount of Olives* by Hébert. Already, he was seeing things as a religious zealot, not an art dealer. This devotion, which conditioned his cultural choices, extended also to the books he considered good or bad for Theo: 'Have you done what I advised you to do, have you got rid of the books by Michelet, Renan &c? I believe it will give you peace. You certainly won't forget that page from Michelet about that portrait of a lady by P. de Champagne, and don't forget Renan either, but still, get rid of them.' [55]

Van Gogh recognized the great value of the writings of Michelet and Renan, but he was unable to tolerate them in his great religious fever. If we read Renan's *La vie de Jésus* and the Michelet's *Histoire de France*, it is easy to understand why. In *La vie de Jésus* Renan makes a superb demonstration of the contradictions in the four Gospels and attributes Jesus's miracles to the lively imagination, credulity and blindness of the common people in the lands where Christ preached. These considerations were not compatible with the beliefs of a young man who spent as much time as possible in Protestant and other churches. His decision to place the works of Renan and Michelet on his banned list was allied to an act of contrition and intellectual privation. Van Gogh gave himself up unconditionally to the demands of faith, which he refused to endanger by setting discordant voices against it. In his eyes, the Scriptures were holy and unshakeable; through them he justified his actions and his decisions; with their aid he explained the events that arose in his life. Finally, and increasingly, he decided to apply the Bible's truths in practical terms, in the most faithful and literal way possible.

Vincent's advice to put aside the books of Michelet and Renan refers to a remark made recently: 'Read no more Michelet or any other book (except the Bible) until we've seen each other again at Christmas.' [45] Theo had attended a funeral and had told his brother of his sadness. He knew the deceased, a man who 'had read *L'amour*' by Michelet, who loved nature and found in it a 'quiet melancholy'. This last term seemed too much for Vincent. He replied, sending back Theo's letter: 'Pa wrote to me recently "Melancholy does not hurt, but makes us see things with a holier eye". That is true "quiet melancholy", fine gold, but we aren't that far yet, not by a long way.' [46]

Melancholy, sadness, despair, these were all favourite themes of romanticism and symbolism, and an essential constituent of realism. For Van Gogh, melancholy was above all a state of grace. It was not given to just anyone to attain it. The poor tears of his young brother, moved by a funeral service, could not claim to have anything in common with melancholy, because in the case put forward by Theo, it was a form of suffering. Now, 'melancholy does not hurt'. Conversely, suffering should not lead to melancholy. Suffering is necessary and holy, and we must rejoice in it: that is the only path which leads to God. Also, until around 1878, the expression 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing'⁸⁹ would return constantly. Life is a pilgrimage, a calvary, whose slope is steep and long. It is difficult and

taxing, but it leads to higher things. It leads to what Van Gogh called 'it', in the absence of anything better and with the logic of a 'collier's faith', which he claimed. Thus he refused Theo the right to attach too much importance to what he felt. His own religious system, his way of living a Christian life, dictated his own conduct as it had to dictate that of his brother.

Following this educative logic, Vincent sent back Theo's letter, in which he had dared to express his opinions on melancholy, crossed out and covered in comments like a schoolboy's homework. This is very significant on account of the step it represents: that of correcting his brother's behaviour and ideas. But also because of the indications it gives us about what Van Gogh approved of and what he condemned. And in this respect, it is not so much the written inventory that is rich in clarifications about his faith, but the fact that *nothing* left him indifferent. Every part of his brother's letter affected him, and everything that letter said was either good or bad. There was no happy medium, no half-measure.



5. Jean-François Millet, *The church at Gréville*, 1871-74, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

In fact, Van Gogh could not envisage the realities surrounding his brother being any different from his own. And in the same reality, same attitude, same thoughts, same battle, Van Gogh proved incapable of empathy towards Theo. He could not conceive of the fact that his brother might have different ideas from his own, convinced as he was that he was on the right path, the *only* right path. On a small scale, this mechanism is that of all monotheistic religions. Whereas the ancients did not hesitate to include new divinities in their pantheons, the great monotheistic religions are exclusive and jealous. The first condition for loving God is no longer to adore any others, and those who do so regardless are sinful. Vincent repeated this fundamental religious attitude on an individual level: the truths he discovered were universal, absolute, and one had to abandon oneself to these truths unconditionally. 'One must die to oneself': deny the self, sacrifice one's own petty preoccupations in order to succeed in moving beyond the mundane. Allowing oneself to snivel after a man's death, sinking into a 'sad', directionless melancholy, was incompatible with this system of thought. The correction Vincent inflicted on his brother was thus characteristic of the unconditionality with which he lived his passionate faith. Fortunately, Christianity leaves its door wide open to those who are in sin, for 'all is new in Jesus Christ'. This other leit-motif enabled him to soften his extreme position somewhat: it was always possible to return to the Father; the lost sheep and the prodigal son will find the Kingdom of God.

3

The imitation of Jesus Christ

Passion and communion: resignation to the need for suffering

Punctuated by leitmotifs such as ‘Sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing’ and ‘all is new in Jesus Christ’, Van Gogh’s conversation between 1872 and 1878 was also distinguished by the idea of the consolation that Christ offers, and the resignation to suffering that one should display. Van Gogh raised suffering, of which melancholy is one manifestation, to the rank of a condition necessary for the sublime: it enables ‘true feeling’, gives access to ‘it’. These factors had their origins in a pre-occupation which was very natural for such an enthusiastic believer: *imitatio christi*, the desire to follow Christ, broadly inspired and nurtured by Thomas à Kempis’s *De imitatione Christi*.

The Gospels tell the story of a son of God who emerged from the ranks of the common people, who showed through self-denial and an exemplary resistance to suffering that the only thing that matters on this earth is love for one’s fellow man. The ‘son of man’, innocent of any crime, consented to experience the torments of crucifixion with the sole aim of washing away humanity’s sins. In Van Gogh’s mind, this exemplary sacrifice was an absolute point of reference. There was nothing higher, nothing purer, and nothing more beautiful. Indeed, his ideas of elevation, whether religious or artistic, were entirely conditioned by this theorem: sacrifice alone leads to the sublime. The last years of his life, when he no longer mentioned Christ or his example except on an artistic level, are the most obvious proof of this. From an excess of contrition, his body and his mind eventually crumbled, sacrificed upon the altar of the fine arts.

In February 1877, Van Gogh copied out a poem by Longfellow, ‘The light of stars’, whose last verse is:

O, fear not in a world like this
 And thou shalt know ere long
 Know, how sublime a thing it is
 To suffer and be strong. [103]⁹⁰

Vincent added (in English): 'As being sorrowful yet always rejoicing.' This fundamental idea was also expressed in his previous letter: 'If we let ourselves be taught by the experience of life and led by godly sorrow, then new vitality may spring from the tired heart. If we are once good and tired, then we shall believe more firmly in God, and shall find in Christ, through His word, a Friend and Comforter.' [102] The Christian Van Gogh wanted to comfort those who were in despair. And he did so by going down into the mines of the Borinage, where his help was noted and appreciated. But he was not an advocate of soft words or a comforting listener. The intellectual Van Gogh created his own theory of human suffering and its usefulness. Thus, when his sister Anna became engaged, with her family's approval, after spending several years as a lady's companion – an occupation regarded as beneath her – Van Gogh declared that his sister's situation was imbued with 'poetry'; henceforth, her years of suffering would constitute a veritable treasure and a source of happiness: 'There's nevertheless much poetry in it, and such years are a treasure not easily lost, and when one denies and humbles oneself, especially the first time, one has a wonderful feeling of inner peace.' [121]

There is no place for searching for the key to happiness in the present day. It is the past which provides it, through the memory and consciousness of having emerged, strengthened, from an ordeal. As Renan said, 'Man is not placed on the earth merely to be happy.' But Van Gogh was able to find this same idea even in the work of Erckmann-Chatrian, whose spiritual and philosophical scope is all in all quite limited: 'Long, long ago, in *L'ami Fritz* by Erckmann-Chatrian, I read a remark by the old rabbi that has often come to mind since: "We are not alive in order to be happy, but we must try to deserve happiness."' [292]

'Young' Vincent, prior to choosing the path of art, did not see himself as a true comforter. The only comforter is Christ, and Van Gogh limited himself to wishing to show others the way that leads to consolation,⁹¹ without harbouring ambitions to change the course of things. Already his reflections were marked by a certain degree of fatalism. For example, he quoted Fénelon: 'Man proposes and God disposes.' [35] This quotation would find a very distant but very audible echo in a letter written in June 1889, at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence: 'There, at least, [Voltaire] ... makes one glimpse that it's still possible that life has a meaning, "although one agreed in conversation that the things of this world did not always go according to the wisest people's liking."' [783]⁹² Van Gogh was then in a totally different state of mind, but his resignation, his abnegation and his belief that he would emerge strengthened from this battle, imposed upon him by Providence, were still present.

Sower of the word

When Van Gogh realized that he was not cut out for a career as an art dealer, he hoped to become a pastor. More specifically, he wished to become a 'sower of the word' [109], which is different from a 'shepherd'. The pastor is a leader of his flock. The 'sower of the word' is a man who, like Jesus Christ or Friedrich Nietzsche, sows words with the aim of seeing those words take root and develop in other people's minds. The role that Van Gogh proposes to play, in particular when he writes to his brother, can be described by this term, 'sower of the word'.

Testimonies of this state of mind can be found on every page of correspondence during the years 1872-78: his many words of advice, observations and impressions are systematically accompanied by Biblical or secular quotations. In September 1876, he advised Theo in a rather casual manner to read Isaiah 9, 11, 35, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45: 2, 49, 53, 55, 58, 61, 63, 65, then Jeremiah 3, 17, 30 and 31! [90] Van Gogh's state of mind would change, but the basic pattern remained the same: in 1887, he wrote to his sister Wil that 'one can scarcely be said to belong to one's time' [574], if one is not familiar with the work of the French Naturalists. Writing to Gauguin, in 1889, he insisted that his correspondent reads *Tartarin de Tarascon* by Alphonse Daudet, so that they can share specific ideas about the south of France and its people.⁹³ The unconditional quality which comes through in Van Gogh's prose is the result of an unshakeable conviction that his correspondents will not be able to understand what he feels and subscribe to his ideas unless they read what he has read. The written word has an absolute power, capable of unifying and dividing; it is a power which many believers attribute to the Bible. Van Gogh extends this power to other texts which he has discovered and which he does not doubt. In urging his correspondents to read what he has read, he uses the words of others as a vehicle for his own ideas.

The most striking thing about this attitude as a *Sower of the word* is the selection Van Gogh makes regarding what he sows; he never seeks to give a complete idea of any text at all, even in the form of a short, faithful summary. He picks out what he finds useful and beautiful, isolating what he considers should be placed in the forefront, without taking account of the work as a whole, its message, the problems conjured up or the author's intentions. His attitude as a blind believer, his apparent credulity, has made many authors say that Van Gogh was *influenced* by what he read. Now, when we look more closely at the selections made by the painter, when we compare what distinguishes them, we always find the same themes: simplicity, humility, work, the earth, nature; in the Bible, in Michelet, Zola, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Dickens or Loti, Vincent finds the same ideas. He is not only subject to an *influence*; he also *recognizes* a number of his own ideas in the texts he reads. The authors and the texts he mentions are above all the *mirror*, and not necessarily the *source* for this extremely individual mind. Unquestionably, Van Gogh assimilates

the literary material, the ideas it contains, and the form it takes.⁹⁴ And before this material re-emerges from his pen, in the form of quotations, references, or as a stylistic contamination detectable in his writing, a work of transformation and adaptation has taken place. If he was influenced and shaped by any text, it was only by the Bible. But even in the case of this formative text, he retained only certain aspects of it, and the direct influence of the Bible ceased suddenly around 1881, whereas the essential values which the painter had made his own remained relevant.

When Van Gogh discovered the work of Emile Zola, in 1882, he wrote to Theo: 'In "Une page d'amour" by Emile Zola I found several townscapes painted or drawn in a masterly, masterly fashion – entirely in the sentiment of the simple passage in your letter.' [244] By using the word 'painted' instead of 'described', Van Gogh positioned his perception of the text in a realm he knew well, that of painting and drawing. Here, the text did not influence Vincent; on the contrary, the painter projected his pictorial knowledge onto the novel. Judy Sund, in her incomparable *True to temperament*, considered that this reference bears witness to Van Gogh's taste for 'word painting'.⁹⁵ It is undeniable that Van Gogh was sensitive to the visual aspect of a text, and that he mentally visualized the scenes or landscapes described. He also regularly praised the merits of authors capable of 'drawing' or 'painting' effectively with words, such as Dickens, Michelet and Zola. Elsewhere, he used the same terms to describe the *novels* and the *paintings* he liked. But he did not wonder about the method used and did not seek to reproduce textual or narrative effects in his paintings. Indeed, there is no evidence that his literary choices were conditioned by his visual interests, which were specific to the painter, nor that his artistic production was conditioned by his literary interests, which were specific to the reader. Vincent wanted to be himself. The influence of the texts upon Van Gogh is limited; from the books he read, he took first and foremost what suited his way of thinking.

A passage in a letter of July 1882 is significant in this respect: 'So it was a mistake a few years ago when there was a vogue among the moderns for imitating the old masters. This is why I think what *père* Millet says is so right: I think it absurd that people want to appear to be something other than they are. That seems to be an unremarkable observation and yet it's as unfathomably deep as the ocean, and I for one think it advisable to take it to heart in all things.' [249] In this passage, Van Gogh illustrates an artistic point of view, which is to be unwilling to imitate so as not to 'wish to appear to be' something one is not, with a quote from Millet which he considers 'unfathomably deep', in other words, beyond the range of all criticism, of any possible attempt at calling it into question. Thus he backs up his own opinion, using a source which he presents as having absolute authority; before being, or *in addition to* being influenced by Millet, he *uses* Millet's influence to justify the fact that he must remain faithful to himself. A virtuous and circular argument ...

Van Gogh's literary panorama, which is a true mirror of his mind, has a large number of facets, some of which are distorting: the text alone is not sufficient to

express what the painter thought, experienced or desired at any given moment in his life. We must take account of the context, of Van Gogh's interests, and of his innermost thoughts if we are to understand how he perceived or used a particular text, if we wish to make this mirror reflect effectively. His behaviour as a selective reader had its origins in his use of the Bible, the book he used most often in order to support, shore up and justify his ideas: he did not transfer patterns of Christian thought onto an artistic project, which would become its secular version, but he was sensitive to a number of profound aspirations which he had encountered in Christianity, and to which he would remain faithful in his painting.

Evangelism

The wish to become a sower of the word, first declared in March 1877 [109], reappeared a month later [112]. The role of 'sower' of the word is specified: in accordance with the spirit of the Gospels, Van Gogh wanted to console those who had need of it. He wished, by sharing the *yoke* of the humblest folk, to *commune* with the destitution of the afflicted. The word 'yoke' is used many times in the Old Testament – almost always to symbolize oppression – but in the Gospels, it appears only in Matthew, to symbolize an *alliance* with Christ: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and your souls will find rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'⁹⁶ Van Gogh quoted this passage in February 1877 [102] and added a verse from Luke: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross each day, and follow me.'⁹⁷

Thus, *passion* becomes *communion*, and Van Gogh imposes the true life of an apostle upon himself. The 'yoke' is no longer something to free oneself from, but becomes a linking arch which is cause for rejoicing. To deny oneself, share Christ's yoke, accompany him in his sufferings, this, according to Van Gogh, is what the Christian must do, for this act of sharing leads to God, to the infinite, to the sublime. As Verkade rightly remarks, what distinguishes Van Gogh is his fanatical attachment to orthopraxis: he applied Christ's teachings to the letter, imitating his actions as faithfully as possible.⁹⁸ Thus, when the opportunity presented itself, Van Gogh had no hesitation in doing what he believed Christ would have done in his place. He gave the most spectacular examples of this attitude during his short career as an evangelist in the Borinage, in 1878-80, but also by taking in Sien, the prostitute with whom he shared his life in The Hague from the start of 1882 to September 1883. The echo we find in the explanation he gave of one of his most famous canvases, *La berceuse* (ill. 28), that it was designed to comfort 'hearts in distress', bears witness to the persistence of this determination, and to the impact which this attitude had on his career as an artist.

The imitation of Jesus Christ by Thomas à Kempis, which played a vital part in intensifying Van Gogh's religious thought and actions, contains a large number of factors in common with the correspondence of the early years. Two of the most significant passages may give an idea of what was driving the young zealot: 'Then will all the servants of the Cross, who in their lives conformed themselves to the Crucified, stand with confidence before Christ their Judge.'⁹⁹ And: 'The further a man advances in the spiritual life, the heavier and more numerous he finds the crosses, for his ever-deepening love of God makes more bitter the sorrows of his earthly exiles. Yet a man who is afflicted in many ways is not without solace and comfort, for he perceives the great benefit to be reaped from the bearing of his cross. For while he bears it with a good will, the whole burden is changed into hope of God's comfort.'¹⁰⁰

At the same time as he was so enthusiastic about Thomas à Kempis, Van Gogh was reading Bossuet's *Oraisons funèbres*. The difficult language used by Bossuet may have prevented Van Gogh from grasping all the nuances of what the writer said, but the spirit of these texts suited him perfectly. Bossuet systematically uses the lives of those whose funeral orations he is pronouncing to show that even the longest, most exemplary life is a mere nothing. All that counts is the eternity of life after death. Glory, ambition, wealth and earthly titles will not count before the eternal one, except perhaps to the detriment of their owners.

In the light of these works, the need for self-denial is an additional explanation of Van Gogh's systematic recourse to texts, both sacred and secular. He may have desired to sow the word, but he did not wish to profess ideas that were entirely his own. In so doing, he would be committing an unforgivable sin of pride. Finally, he imitated Christ and shouldered the role of his disciples: that of sharing the thoughts of others, while at the same time being fiercely selective in his sowing.

Between Christianity, history and daily life: 'it', or aspiring to the infinite

The essence of faith, art and the sublime seems to be summed up in an unidentifiable entity which Van Gogh called 'it'. As he himself had not found the means to express exactly what he meant by this deliberately vague term, it would be absurd to attempt a definition. Nevertheless, given that this was something that Van Gogh sought to attain, it is vital to try and indicate, at least in a broad terms, what it involves, particularly because this mysterious reality developed in parallel with the painter's life. This development reinforces the idea that Van Gogh transposed the same ideas from one situation to another with an astonishing freedom, and it indicates, in particular that Van Gogh's interests turned in other directions after his time in the Borinage. After 1881 'it' became detached from its religious basis and led him, smoothly, towards other ideas.

The first time Van Gogh mentioned 'it', it is difficult to grasp if he is referring to a religious or artistic absolute: 'Michel, though, isn't nearly so beautiful as that landscape described in that passage in Adam Bede, which we both found so moving. Bonington, too, *almost* painted it, and yet that isn't *it* either.' [44] It is not clear if 'it' applies to the passage described in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* or to something loftier. On the other hand, it appears clear that, as far as Van Gogh was concerned, there was an indefinable benchmark, which he did not rule out finding in a work of art, and that he was building a hierarchy whose absolute reference was 'it'.

The second significant mention of 'it' is found in the letter of March 1876 quoted earlier: 'You'll surely see many beautiful things on your trip; although a feeling for nature isn't *it*, it's nonetheless a wonderful thing to have; may it always remain with us' [72]. Here, 'it' designates an absolute of a religious nature, since Van Gogh had already indicated the superiority of religious sentiment over feelings for nature.¹⁰¹

In a letter written in Amsterdam in June 1877, the means of attaining 'something' are set out: work, self-denial and perseverance. It is not certain that this 'something' is 'it', since it would be surprising if Van Gogh claimed to be able to gain access himself to the thing he had set up as an absolute value. But the parallel is obvious and the plan transparent: he hoped to become an *honnête homme*, an 'inner, spiritual man', and he tried to give himself the means he considered adequate in order to attain this goal: 'I have such a great desire to progress and also to know the Bible well and thoroughly, and also to know many things, such as what I wrote to you about Cromwell. "No day without a line", daily writing, reading, working and practising, with meekness and perseverance, will surely lead to *something*.' [120] A few lines further on, he added: 'It's a beautiful city, this, today I again saw a corner for Thijs Maris or Allebé, namely houses behind the Oosterkerk, on a small inner courtyard, I had to see the sexton to ask about Uncle's place in the church and I was in his house, also living there is a shoemaker &c., but one finds *it* everywhere, the world is full of it, may our own heart be filled with *it*.'

Here again, art and religion are closely linked, but 'it' dwells in the surrounding world, and no longer in a work of art or in religion per se. This idea is perfectly compatible with the religious ideas Van Gogh had been brought up amongst: God can be seen through his creation. Increasingly, the future painter was convinced that the proof of God's presence in the environment takes place through the agency of a chosen one, such as a pastor or an artist, an idea that we find again two months later: 'Nowadays one sees here in all the book and print shops very good portraits of Uhland, Andersen, Dickens and many others, also of clergymen such as Ten Kate, it's good to look at them often, to see whether one might find *it* or *something* of it.' [127]

The authors whom Van Gogh admired were the repositories of the secret that leads to 'it', which he sought impatiently. Thus, although unable to define it, he at least managed to localize it. He did not know its essence, but he knew its strength, its form and the path which might lead to it. He recognized it when he encountered it, and artists, writers and pastors could facilitate this encounter. This was a characteristic mechanism for Van Gogh, whose points of view were strengthened by the recognition of his ideas in other people's works. Thus, it is not so much a reality external to himself that he was seeking, but perhaps the most intimate, most genuine part of his own being. 'It' would then be the reflection of his own moral, spiritual, intellectual and artistic ideal, which he encountered in all the disciplines capable of conveying such an absolute value. He positioned his aspirations beyond religion, which was only one way *among others* to attain it. In other words, and like one of his favourite authors, George Eliot,¹⁰² he detached the Christian ideal from Christianity, and this would lead him to refrain from all forms of religion, whilst still remaining faithful to a number of principles that he shared with Christianity.

Two months later, Van Gogh confirmed that 'it' was accessible through art, drawing a parallel between 'it' and the artistic interpretation of the events surrounding the French Revolution of 1789:

All those French paintings about the days of the Revolution, such as *The Girondists* and *Last victims of the terror* and *Marie Antoinette* by Delaroche and Muller, and that *Young citizen* [ill. 6] and other paintings by Goupil, and then *Anker* and so many others, what a beautiful whole they form with many books, such as those by Michelet and Carlyle and also Dickens (*Tale of two cities*). In all of that combined there's something of the spirit which is that of the Resurrection and the Life, which shall live though *it* seems dead, for it is not dead, but it sleepeth. [132]

In this passage, 'it' has become the essence of the revolution of 1789. It is probable that Van Gogh had taken this idea from Michelet, who saw this revolution as an outcome of History, the fruit of the liberation of a people, who had won freedom through its workforce. Michelet, whom one might classify as a deist, did not rule out the fact that this liberation might be of a divine nature.¹⁰³ Van Gogh, unlike Michelet, perhaps did not see the revolution itself as a divine act, but he glimpsed 'it' in the artistic interpretation that has been placed upon it. Michelet, who wanted above all to be a historian, cannot escape being categorized as an artist, for his account of the events was heavily seasoned with literary devices. Referring to 'Resurrection and the Life', Van Gogh indicated that here, 'it' was of a Christian nature, which is confirmed by a remark he had made shortly before: 'You know that old Father Lips died. At the funeral Pa spoke about The burial in the cornfield



6. Jules Adolphe Goupil, *A young citizen of the year V*, 1873; Goupil & Co. photograph, Musée Goupil, Bordeaux

by Van der Maaten and also about 1 Thess. iv:13-18, v:1-10, that is surely *it*, as is Mark iv:26-29 and John xii:24 and 1 Cor. xv:35-38, 40-58.' [128]

At first sight, this succession of references is rather daunting. But when we read the passages mentioned, they impose their own coherence. The teaching of these verses from the first Epistle to the Thessalonians is that one must not be distressed about death, as, when the Day of Judgement comes, the dead will be the first to be reborn and will precede the living into the Kingdom of Heaven; we should not worry about the Day of Judgement, for those who are faithful to Jesus Christ are the sons of light, and since they are watchful and sober, they will not be caught unawares in the darkness like the drunkard or the sleeper. The passage ends with the advice, 'wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one

another, even as also ye do.’¹⁰⁴ Offering mutual consolation was a task that Van Gogh *the artist* would later make his priority.

The other passages cited, which Van Gogh compared to those used by his father, and in which he also saw ‘it’, deal with similar themes. The first, Mark iv: 26-29, is the parable of the seed which grows naturally. This parable is an explanation of the Kingdom of God: man throws the seed into the earth, and his seeds germinate, grow and ripen, without the sower knowing how, before they are harvested. This parable offers a fine parallel to the passages which Van Gogh senior quoted at the burial of Lips: it is natural to die, to be ‘harvested’ when one is ripe, and when one has lived faithfully according to the precepts of Jesus Christ. The coming of the Kingdom of God, the Judgement, is not to be feared. The verse from John mentioned by Van Gogh is a fine illustration of the idea of ‘the death of the self’, the absence of ambition, and the total abandonment to a higher cause: ‘Verily, verily I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.’¹⁰⁵ Chapter 12 of John’s Gospel teaches that we must stop being attached to life and follow Jesus, in order to remain in his light, ‘for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth.’¹⁰⁶ The parallel with I Thessalonians: 4 and 5 is self-evident. In the passage from the first Epistle to the Corinthians that Van Gogh indicated, the image of the grain of wheat is once again used. Death is put forward as a condition necessary in order to be saved in the Kingdom of God.

Thus, just as Vincent distinguished ‘it’ in the Revolution of 1789 not directly but in the artistic interpretation that was made of it, here ‘it’ resides in the process used by Jesus: the parable. In June 1888, in Arles, Vincent would write to his friend Emile Bernard:

This great artist – Christ – although he disdained writing books on ideas and feelings – was certainly much less disdainful of the spoken word – the parable above all. (What a sower, what a harvest, what a fig tree, &c.)

And who would dare tell us that he lied, the day when, scornfully predicting the fall of the buildings of the Romans, he stated, ‘heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.’

Those spoken words, which as a prodigal, great lord he didn’t even deign to write down, are one of the highest, the highest summit attained by art, which in them becomes a creative force, a pure creative power.

These reflections, my dear old Bernard – take us a very long way – a very long way – *raising us above art itself*. They enable us to glimpse – the art of making life, the art of being immortal – alive. [635]

A letter written from Etten in November 1881 indicates that the essence of ‘it’ was constituted above all by a method, an interpretation or a particular motivation,

rather than a well-defined thing (even though Van Gogh had by this time already renounced religion and was seeking 'truth' rather than the illusion of a happy after-life): 'It seems to me, exchanging everything for everything is the real, true thing, that's *it*.' [183] 'It' expresses above all an experience of the *infinite*, an epiphany, an ecstasy. Vincent was not a mystic; he neither saw nor experienced anything supernatural. 'It' is nature itself, at its simplest and most sublime. But this nature exists only if it is seen, felt, assimilated and conveyed by an artist, the first and most powerful of whom was Jesus Christ.

A synthesis of the relationship that Van Gogh maintained, during his years of religious fervour, with God, with work, with 'the infinite' and the 'wondrous' can be found in a passage from a letter written from Amsterdam in April 1878:

Happy is he who has faith in God, for he shall overcome all of life's difficulties in the end, though it be not without pain and sorrow. One cannot do better than to hold fast to the thought of God and endeavour to learn more of Him, amidst everything, in all circumstances, in all places and at all times; one can do this with the Bible as with all other things. It is good to go on believing that everything is miraculous, more so than one can comprehend, for that is the truth, it is good to remain sensitive and lowly and meek in heart, even though one sometimes has to hide that feeling, because that is often necessary, it is good to be very knowledgeable about the things that are hidden from the wise and prudent of the world but that are revealed as though by nature to the poor and simple, to women and babes. For what can one learn that is better than that which God has put by nature into every human soul, that which in the depths of every soul lives and loves, hopes and believes, unless one should wilfully destroy it? There, in that, is the need for nothing less than the boundless and miraculous, and a man does well if he is satisfied with nothing less and doesn't feel at home until he has acquired it.

That is the avowal that all great men have expressed in their works, all who have thought a little more deeply and have sought and worked a little harder and have loved more than others, who have launched out into the deep of the sea of life. Launching out into the deep is what we too must do if we want to catch anything, and if it sometimes happens that we have to work the whole night and catch nothing, then it is good not to give up after all but to let down the nets again at dawn.

So let us simply go on quietly, each his own way, always following the light 'sursum corda', and as such who know that we are what others are and that others are what we are, and that it is good to have love one to another namely of the best kind, that believeth all things and hopeth all things, endureth all things and never faileth. [143]

According to Van Gogh, God had given mankind a need for the infinite. All 'great men have expressed [this] in their works.' In other words, those who have expressed 'the need for the boundless' in their works are 'great men, and those who have not expressed it are not. Attaining this infinite involves simplicity, work, the love of truth and of one's neighbour. All Van Gogh's teachers of thought and painting (who were often one and the same) answered these demands. Vincent sought the man through his work, as he sought God through His creation, even after losing his belief in all organized religion:

I'm thinking more and more that we shouldn't judge the Good Lord by this world, because it's one of his studies that turned out badly. But what of it, in spoiled studies – when you're really fond of the artist – you don't find much to criticize – you keep quiet. But we're within our rights to ask for something better. We'd have to see other works by the same hand though. This world was clearly cobbled together in haste, in one of those bad moments when its author no longer knew what he was doing, and didn't have his wits about him. What legend tells us about the Good Lord is that he went to enormous trouble over this study of his for a world. I'm inclined to believe that the legend tells the truth, but then the study is worked to death in several ways. It's only the great masters who make such mistakes; that's perhaps the best consolation, as we're then within our rights to hope to see revenge taken by the same creative hand. And – then – this life – criticized so much and for such good, even excellent reasons – we – shouldn't take it for anything other than it is, and we'll be left with the hope of seeing better than that in another life. [613]

Divine in origin, the infinite is not accessible, but it is approachable. Van Gogh called all manifestations of this infinite 'it', and sometimes 'something on high'. Thus a coherent and surprising mental pattern is built up, and religion is not its only habitat. On the contrary, this is where the idea of divinity encounters art, that is to say in the miracle of *creation*, which proves to be an indefinable, ideal force, towards which, according to Van Gogh, we must reach out with all the physical, intellectual and spiritual means at our disposal: by denying the self, by loving our neighbour, and by working as hard as possible. Religion is not a necessary condition, but faith – not necessarily religious faith – is. Indeed, it seems that Van Gogh's thinking, which, following Renan, he regarded as his country, took a religious turn only because religion was its natural setting. His faith was merely the external casing of a stubborn mind, aspiring to the infinite; he found and recognized in Christianity a number of elaborate reflections on the meaning of life and on the path he could choose to follow. These reflections are not exclusive to the Christian religion even though they find numerous echoes in it. This explains the astonishing continuity in Van Gogh's ideas during the years 1880-82, during

which, nevertheless, he lost all trust in the church, and suddenly stopped referring to the Bible. Van Gogh needed to read and to compare his ideas with what he read; but his paradoxical mind, narrow and open at the same time, could not be content with what Christianity offered him. His failed experience as an evangelist made him realize around 1881 that he wanted to devote himself to art. He retained the same favourite themes, the same preoccupations and felt invested with the same mission – but lost the will to use the word of God to console his fellow men. From now on, he would use his pencils and his brushes.

4

Rebellion, suffering and sentiment

Rebellion

In his quest for intellectual, artistic and spiritual reference points, Van Gogh built himself a benevolent, malleable pantheon. With no support other than from his brother, he sought and found examples and precedents to justify his choice of career and his working methods. He was brought up with a respect for the written word, and it is by the written word that he defined himself.

Nevertheless, a detailed examination of the relationship he maintained with his teachers shows that the personality of the admired artist or author was predominant, above and beyond the moral and aesthetic value of his works. Van Gogh often chose rebels, unsubmissive and intransigent individuals – who corresponded to his own character. When he decided to become a painter, he freed himself from his religion without freeing himself from a faith in the absolute, which would direct him all his life. He remained convinced that there is always more to discover, to obtain, to put forward. His conception of the role of the artist and of the means of exercising that role remained faithful to what he had admired in Christianity: simplicity, nature, work, and consequently, the possibility of consoling one's neighbour. But Van Gogh seems to have especially admired obstinacy, abnegation and intransigence, which he made the prime qualities of the artist and thinker.

As he discovered new authors, Vincent freed himself from religion and from the pressure exerted on him by his family. In comparing his father's 'petty ideas' with the ideas of men he considered superior, he reduced the pastor to a limited, narrow-minded individual, a regrettable obstacle but necessary to his career as an artist. First, he spent time with the painters he met in The Hague, where he discovered Zola's Naturalism, and where he began to compare his own ideas with realist theories. However, he remained faithful to his profound beliefs, and his work was not subject to any methodological or thematic influence from the literary

movements he encountered. The eclecticism that characterizes his literary choices confirms that Van Gogh was driven by a mind opposed to all dogmas, all schools and all movements. In his eyes, all that mattered was *feeling*: the mark of the artist, which represents the infinite, the eternal, a kind of cement between worthy men, composed of emotion and recognition.

He recognized himself in the authors and artists who had to fight for their fame, against contempt for their religion, their opinions or their poetics. This explains why he liked the atheist Dickens as much as the mystical believer Hugo; and it is why he became impassioned about Zola while still continuing to read Andersen's tales. His criteria of selection were concerned with the 'rightness' of the artistic or intellectual act. The form and the method mattered little to him. Van Gogh became a creator because he was not content with Creation. His attitude was that of a disenchanted believer, disappointed by the inadequacy between the supposed perfection of the divine, and the world as he sees it, as he described it in Arles, in May 1888.¹⁰⁷

The turning-point: summer 1880

In the Borinage, from 1878 to 1880, Van Gogh saw the culmination of his religious commitment. His sole need seems to have been to give meaning to his existence. He conducted the experiment in total sacrifice, indigence and the most absolute asceticism, applying to the letter the Biblical writings he admired. This course of action bears witness to a determination to fit into a group of people, to have a well-defined social function, and to be able to act as a spiritual guide among those who had need of it. But contrary to the illusions he cherished, his sacrifice led him straight into an impasse. The contract as an evangelist that he entered into was not renewed, for reasons that his employers worded cautiously, to cover Van Gogh's undoubted failure to submit to the agreed rules. It is probable that he had defied all the advice and calls to order that must have been directed at him,¹⁰⁸ in order to continue spreading the Good News according to his own beliefs. But Vincent had to face a bitter acknowledgement, and give up fulfilling the role he had assigned himself. Deprived of the means of survival, he decided, 'with some reluctance' [155], to accept the 50 Francs his brother sent him. These 50 Francs were the first payment in a long patronage, which would not end until Vincent's death, more than ten years later. In the early days, the payments were irregular, and a few weeks after receiving this first amount, Van Gogh once again found himself short of money. He attempted to survive without a well-defined occupation, travelling as a poverty-stricken vagabond, sleeping outside, and exchanging a few drawings for a few crusts of bread.¹⁰⁹ Soon, an arrangement was made with Theo, who agreed to finance Vincent's re-training.

The letter he wrote after accepting the 50 Francs from his brother, which informs us of Van Gogh's material and psychological circumstances at the time, presents its author as a victim: his situation is the fruit of a series of misunderstandings, all regrettable and beyond his control. The letter is a long justification, a heavy-handed apologia, supported by numerous literary references designed, among other things, to clear its author of any intention to sponge off his family – even if he does accept their financial aid. This letter marks a break with the correspondence up to that point. Vincent has lost faith in all organized churches. He refuses to admit that he was unable to adapt to the circumstances or that he made a mistaken assessment, and he does not recognize that he took the wrong road. He explains that the dishonesty of the 'evangelical gentlemen', his employers, was responsible for this failure. The break with the organization that employed him is confirmed by the following passage:

You must know that it's the same with evangelists as with artists. There's an old, often detestable, tyrannical academic school, the abomination of desolation, in fact – men having, so to speak, a suit of armour, a steel breastplate of prejudices and conventions. Those men, when they're in charge of things, have positions at their disposal, and by a system of circumlocution seek to support their protégés, and to exclude the natural man from among them.

Their God is like the God of Shakespeare's drunkard, Falstaff, 'the inside of a church'; in truth, certain evangelical (???) gentlemen find themselves, by a strange conjunction (perhaps they themselves, if they were capable of human feeling, would be somewhat surprised) find themselves holding the very same point of view as the drunkard in spiritual matters. But there's little fear that their blindness will ever turn into clear-sightedness on the subject. [155]

For Van Gogh, the world of 'spiritual matters' and that of art were intrinsically linked, by nature and by essence. And, as usual, he rebelled – on this occasion against the 'the old academic school', hidebound by prejudices and stifling conventions. The sacked zealot regarded himself, in contrast with these conventions, as a 'natural man'. Perhaps the reading of *Robinson Crusoe* inspired him to this image. Although Van Gogh does not mention Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one may even think of the latter's 'noble savage': since he is naturally good, man has no need to respect hollow, superfluous social conventions in order to do good. On the contrary, society perverts and distorts man, and turns him away from the right path. Van Gogh refused to deviate from this right path. According to him, his employers, who were incapable of human emotion, were equally incapable of leaving the four walls of the church; they had faith in the form of worship instead of having faith in meeting their neighbour, even though that was what the church was designed for in the first place, and they feared going out as men and rubbing

shoulders with other men. A profound bitterness emanates from the lines Vincent wrote to his brother. He was in the grip of immense disappointment. The 'impasse or mess', had been imposed upon him; he had to resign himself to making an about-turn, swearing that it was all for nothing.

Van Gogh also claimed that his family did not realize the true extent of his commitment: as he saw it, he merely did what his heart, his mind and his faith ordered him to do. Could he be reproached for acting according to his nature? Would they have preferred a less honest attitude? In the eyes of those around him, through ignorance and because of the 'prejudices' he had suffered, he felt he had become 'a suspect character'. He went on to say that, left to his own devices, he had gone through a period of indigence and wandering, before regaining the upper hand – 'one matures in the storm' [133] – and he was less disposed to place himself, as he had before, in the hands of Providence alone. He also wrote, just before leaving for the Borinage, that 'when we see the image of unutterable and indescribable forsakenness – of loneliness – of poverty and misery, the end of things or their extremity – the thought of God comes to mind.' [148] Once this desolation was no longer an image, but an experienced reality, it was transformed into an 'impasse', a 'mess'; God was no longer involved, or at least not in the destiny of one who, for several years, had been his most devoted follower.

From now on, Van Gogh read socially committed books on specific subjects: *Uncle Tom's cabin* by Beecher Stowe, *Hard times* by Dickens, and *Le dernier jour d'un condamné* by Victor Hugo. These works all represent well-argued positions, but their theses are not all – in fact not at all – compatible with the moral values of Vincent's upbringing. So these sources were extremely instrumental in the intellectual emancipation of an individual who had once dreamed of being like his father.

It was in the Borinage that Van Gogh decided to make the most of his talent for drawing. Through Theo he received the means to train and perfect his work, put together a studio as best he could, and made his first sketches intended for a wider audience than those close to him. The transition from the status of evangelist to that of an artist was inevitably accompanied by a profound intellectual upheaval. From a life committed to God and His fathomless will, Van Gogh moved to an existence in which he could count only on his own talent and his determination to work. After living cut off from his family, from any employer, surviving only on his own resources, he took his destiny in hand. And for the first time, Van Gogh was not torn between his profound aspirations and the expectations of his family; he chose his own path. The work required in order to re-train did not frighten him. The prospect of spending entire days and nights copying out drawings, polishing his skills, searching, learning, working, fit perfectly into the idea he had of work's just place in his existence; just as he had not hoped to succeed in gaining a position as a preacher except through self-denial and effort, he did not envisage managing to live by his 'draughtsman's fist' [182] except through commitment and hard work.

Nevertheless, the apprentice artist remained deeply marked by the years of religious devotion he had just experienced, and he changed neither his favourite themes nor his method for justifying his acts and his decisions. Literature remained his principal ally in defending his interests. The themes of simplicity, work, poverty and nature remained at the forefront. What changed is that now, when Van Gogh perceived 'it', that unfathomable absolute, he saw not only the proof of the existence of God, but above all the possibility of creating a work of art. In this sense, he was faithful to what Carlyle had said:

To us also, through every star, through every blade of grass, is not a God made visible, if we will open our minds and eyes? We do not worship in that way now: but is it not reckoned still a merit, proof of what we call a 'poetic nature', that we recognize how every object has a divine beauty in it; how every object still verily is 'a window through which we may look into Infinitude itself'? He that can discern the loveliness of things, we call him Poet! Painter, Man of Genius, gifted, lovable.¹¹⁰

During this period of doubt and wandering, Van Gogh read enormously. He continued to see inter-relationships between pictorial art and literary art: 'I'd wish that everyone had what I'm gradually beginning to acquire, the ability to read a book easily and quickly and to retain a strong impression of it. Reading books is like looking at paintings: without doubting, without hesitating, with self-assurance, one must find beautiful that which is beautiful.' [170]

Sund considers that 'the interest in social reform that informed Van Gogh's literary preferences in the 1880s had roots in his religious upbringing and blossomed in the Belgian coal country, where his observations and experiences challenged his original concept of evangelism and reconfigured his notions of Christianity and Christian commitment.' Further on, she states, 'he sought an alternative vessel for his Christian convictions in a self styled religious humanism that drew on the ideas of several nineteenth-century novelists, philosophers and social crusaders, including Eliot, Michelet, Carlyle, Beecher Stowe, Dickens and Hugo. Van Gogh came to see their writings as modern equivalents of the Gospels.'¹¹¹

These declarations deserve to be qualified. In Van Gogh's correspondence, there is no trace of any interest resembling an 'interest in social reform'. And for a good reason; Van Gogh was not preoccupied with systems, but with people. Next, there was no 'original concept of evangelism', unless we think that his original concept was not to have a concept. Vincent never formulated anything that can be closely compared to a social or religious theory that could be applied to human society. On the contrary, Van Gogh related everything to himself and his own experiences. He was a discoverer, a gleaner of ideas, who never allowed a

system, even the Christian one, to exercise any influence upon his future discoveries. Thus, he did not 'seek an alternative vessel for his Christian convictions'. He did not seek, he encountered. He did not search for a philosophical message in literature. He found in it what he wanted to find, a message that is independent of art and religion: to serve others, while protecting one's own interests. His rebelliousness and his independence were instinctive: he never subscribed to a Christian social vision or to socialist theories, impervious to the idea that any theory could direct an entire society towards a bright tomorrow.

Van Gogh had thought religion would provide him with the means to get close to people, and to be useful to them – without however mixing completely with them, an exercise for which he was not particularly gifted. Faced with the failure of his enterprise, he chose an alternative path, which might win him a social position similar to that of Michelet, Hugo and Dickens: the status of an artist, that solitary, inspired figure capable of enlightening the common people.

The need for suffering

Sund based her argument amongst other things on the statement that for Van Gogh, 'the best way to know God is to love many things.' His love for many things, which was conditioned by his faith, had apparently set him on the path to religious humanism, which then led him to Naturalism. This is one of several mistakes that are the result of a serious problem which invalidates some of Sund's observations: it should be noted that Sund did not use the original text, but an English translation littered with errors from the text prepared by Johanna van Gogh-Bonger at the start of the twentieth century. Van Gogh did not write 'many things', but 'a great deal' (new English translation of the letters). For Vincent, it was not a question of believing in some improvement or other in the living conditions of the poor. He comes across rather as a man resigned in a positive sense, who wants to point out the path of self-denial and endurance, and the capacity for suffering, rather than to overturn social values. This is also the message of *Le dernier jour d'un condamné*, and *Uncle Tom's cabin*, as it is of *The imitation of Jesus Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, who did not urge his reader to rebel, console his neighbour, or be consoled. One must aim higher:

As soon as you shall yield yourself to God with all your heart, and seek nothing for your own will and pleasure, but place yourself without reserve at His disposal, you shall find yourself united to Him, and at peace. Nothing will afford you more joy and satisfaction than the perfect fulfilling of God's will. Whoever, therefore, raises his intent to God with a pure heart, and disengages himself from all inordinate love or hatred of any creature, shall best be prepared to

receive grace, and be worthy of the gift of devotion. For Our Lord bestows His blessings where He finds vessels empty to receive them. And the more completely a man renounces worldly things, and the more perfectly he dies to self by the conquest of self, the sooner will grace be given, the more richly will it be infused, and the nearer to God will it raise the heart set free from the world.

Such a person will overflow and wonder, and his heart will be enlarged within him, for the hand of the Lord is upon him, and he has placed himself wholly in His hand forever. Thus shall the man be blessed who seeks God with his whole heart; he has not received his soul in vain. When he receives the secret Eucharist, he merits the great grace of divine union, for he does not look to his own devotion and comfort, but beyond all such devotion and comfort he seeks the honour and glory of God.¹¹²

Christ's suffering is one of the founding myths of Christianity, and Van Gogh was deeply imbued with it. The meaning that Vincent gave to his life as an artist was very close to the meaning he would like to have given to his life as a preacher: to follow the example of Christ, but in a practical way, modern and adaptable to reality. In order to attain this, he would have to, as Thomas à Kempis clearly explained, accept that the *consolation* offered by Christ is secondary to his *passion*; the consolation of Christ *resides in sharing his passion*. This is the *very essence* of the Eucharist; just as Christ had to suffer to proclaim his good news, Van Gogh the artist was entirely disposed to endure suffering in order to draw and paint. Jean-François Millet showed him the way: 'I am not a philosopher, I don't want to stop pain, or find a formula that will make me indifferent or a stoic. Pain is, perhaps, that which makes the artist express himself most distinctly.'¹¹³

There was a definite change in Van Gogh's correspondence after letter 155: he no longer quoted the Bible. While he had not lost faith in a God, he was moving further and further away from any known form of religion:

I'm always inclined to believe that the best way of knowing God is to love a great deal. Love that friend, that person, that thing, whatever you like, you'll be on the right path to knowing more thoroughly, afterwards; that's what I say to myself. But you must love with a high, serious intimate sympathy, with a will, with intelligence, and you must always seek to know more thoroughly, better, and more. That leads to God, that leads to unshakeable faith.

Someone, to give an example, will love Rembrandt, but seriously, that man will know there is a God, he'll believe firmly in Him.

Someone will make a deep study of the history of the French Revolution – he will not be an unbeliever, he will see that in great things, too, there is a sovereign power that manifests itself.

Someone will have attended, for a time only, the free course at the great university of poverty, and will have paid attention to the things he sees with his eyes and hears with his ears, and will have thought about it; he too, will come to believe, and will perhaps learn more about it than he could say. [155]

Van Gogh used three examples, but the impersonal ‘someone’ designates only one person: himself. He adored Rembrandt; he had just studied ‘rather seriously’ the French Revolution of 1789 in Michelet’s book; and he had just endured a period of total destitution, placing him in the front rank of the ‘great university of poverty’. These three examples were also three refutations. First of all, Van Gogh rejected the idea that art can exist without God, or God without art. Next, he refused to confine God’s action within a precise historical or dogmatic framework, taking up Michelet’s idea that the hand of God is perceptible in great historical events. Finally, declaring that the observation of human misery is sufficient for an individual’s faith and edification, he opposed any idea of religious confinement, thus justifying his abandonment of all forms of organized religion: God is among men, at the very heart of their misfortune, and that is where we should come to learn moral lessons, the fundamental values necessary for a worthwhile life. There is no need to go and take lessons from ‘evangelical gentlemen’ who have no contact with reality, imprisoned as they are by a system composed of conventions and prejudices.

Basically, even though Van Gogh declared that he was in an ‘impasse or mess’, in the words of Thomas à Kempis, he had in no way failed, since it is when a man is able to say ‘I am alone and poor’¹¹⁴ that he is at his richest and most powerful: as long as he is willing to ‘forsake himself and all else, and set himself in the lowest place’.¹¹⁵

In the light of these ideas, his transition from evangelist to artist seems totally rational. Or, rather, it was made rational by carefully marshalling personal arguments, reinforced by literary references, and through the independence of his ideas in relation to a dogmatic framework such as a religion. Detached from the religious framework, but not from faith – that is to say, from the capacity to believe in an absolute power – these ideas were now free to develop as they encountered a more modern, more innovative literature: Naturalism. This was not imposed upon him; he evolved towards it naturally, since at heart all he really wanted was to create work that truly portrayed what he saw and heard.

So Van Gogh discovered realist and Naturalist authors at the same time as he broke free from his family and religious framework. His life changed radically, and he needed another theoretical framework to establish and justify his ideas. A key work for him was *Un philosophe sous les toits* by Emile Souvestre, which forms a remarkable link between the realist literature that Van Gogh was now exploring and the edifying and religious works he used to read. Today, Souvestre is little



7. Emile Souvestre,
Van Gogh Museum
Archive

known, and the fact that his name is remembered at all is undoubtedly due to Van Gogh's fondness for his *Philosophe sous les toits*. The title of this work, which is presented as excerpts from a journal written during the course of a year, is self-explanatory. The 'philosopher', a man whose role is to enlighten others, is 'in a garret', a reference to Paris's cheap attic rooms, which were occupied by a whole range of little people living precariously. This dual situation was dear to Van Gogh, who was convinced that a man should not be judged by the *position* he occupied, but by the *role* he fulfilled, action prevailing over status. Once settled in The Hague, in his own studio, he explained his opinion on this question to his uncle C.M.,¹¹⁶ who 'began talking about things like "earning your bread".' Van Gogh answered him in French with a remarkable comparison between the two senses of the Dutch word 'verdienen' – which means both 'earn' and 'deserve':

To earn one's bread or to deserve one's bread – not to deserve one's bread, that is to say, to be unworthy of one's bread, that's what's a crime, every honest man being worthy of his crust – but as for not earning it at all, while at the same time deserving it, oh, that! is a misfortune and A great misfortune. So, if you're saying to me here and now: you're unworthy of your bread, I understand that you're insulting me, but if you're making the moderately fair comment to me that I don't always earn it because sometimes I'm short of it, so be it, but what's the use of making that comment to me? It's scarcely useful to me if it ends there. [211]

‘Every decent man is worthy of his crust.’ This is also the message which comes across in the book by Souvestre, who depicts a man whose occupation seems to be to observe those around him, and who always does his Christian duty; he does nothing immediately useful, has no well-defined job, but enjoys a respectability which people better-off than himself do not have. The first sentence of the foreword to *Un philosophe sous les toits* sets the scene: ‘We know a man who, in the midst of the fever of restlessness and of ambition which racks society in our times, continues to fill his humble part in the world without a murmur, and who still preserves, so to speak, the taste for poverty.’¹¹⁷ Souvestre’s philosopher does not perhaps earn his bread very effectively, but there is no doubt that he deserves it. Van Gogh knew poverty, and he knew humility. Thomas à Kempis frequently stresses that these aspects are essential to faith. *Un philosophe sous les toits* thus resolved the problems Van Gogh faced because of the inadequacy of his means to fulfil his desires. Instead of being a brake on creation, misery, poverty and simplicity become engines, driving it forward. Like Souvestre’s philosopher, he shared the life of the people he described, and helped them, although he did not share their daily tasks. His work, his *function*, was to portray reality, in a fair and accurate way. *Un philosophe sous les toits*, which is written in a didactic tone reminiscent of that used by Michelet, shows that sharing the misfortunes of humble folk enables us to raise ourselves up. An excellent example of this is where Souvestre transcribes a tearful passage from the correspondence between an ‘admirable’ mother and son, and then writes:

Good son, and worthy mother! how such examples bring us back to a love for the human race! In a fit of fanciful misanthropy, we may envy the fate of the savage, and prefer that of the birds to such as he; but impartial observation soon does justice to such paradoxes. We find, on examination, that in the mixed good and evil of human nature, the good so far abounds that we are not in the habit of noticing it, while the evil strikes us precisely on account of its being the exception. If nothing is perfect, nothing is so bad as to be without its compensation or its remedy. What spiritual riches are there in the midst of the evils of society! how much does the moral world redeem the material.

That which will ever distinguish man from the rest of creation, is his power of deliberate affections, and of enduring self-sacrifice. [...]

Thus, the affections make for our species an existence separate from all the rest of creation. Thanks to them, we enjoy a sort of terrestrial immortality; and if other beings *succeed* one another, man alone *perpetuates* himself.¹¹⁸

Un philosophe sous les toits thus embodies the link between realism and faith: it is a Christian book which is presented as an account of the impartial observations

of an author who participates in the life of the humble folk he observes. This is exactly what Zola did when he went down into the coal mines to obtain material before writing *Germinal*. Van Gogh would respect this methodology all his life and regularly proclaimed that it was right; he would wear workmen's clothes to paint and in 1889 he wrote to his mother, from the asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence: 'You'll see from the little portrait of myself that I include that although I saw Paris, London and so many other large cities, and that for years at a time, I still look more or less like a peasant from Zundert, Toon or Piet Prins, say, and I sometimes imagine that I feel and think like that too, only the peasants are of more use in the world.' [811]

Un philosophe sous les toits is not mentioned by Sund, Ködera, Verkade or Erickson. This is surprising when we know the subject of these theses, the content of Souvestre's work, and the importance which Van Gogh attached to it. Vincent quoted Souvestre for the first time in Isleworth in 1876, mentioning that he 'opened that book by Souvestre again (*Le philosophe sous les toits*)' [93]. In the same letter, he also quoted Souvestre's *Les derniers Bretons*. He copied out a long passage from it, which he said he had already copied out for his parents. From Souvestre, he derived a fundamental definition of the country or homeland, which resolved the problem of compatibility he felt between his incessant journeying and his heart, which felt an attachment to his native land: 'one's country or native land is everywhere' [155]. This exclamation, replaced in its original context, is that of a man who is explaining to another man what his country might be.¹¹⁹ In doing so, he shows him everything they see and feel, and declares that his country is 'all that'; it is 'every where'. As usual, Van Gogh forgot or ignored the context of the quotation and concluded from it that in Belgium, all he has to do is look around him to see 'his native land'...

Even though it was poorly understood, this notion was of great help to the young man at a time of failure. He declared that he was homesick, but the ubiquity of the homeland prevented him going under. For what he had correctly understood about Souvestre's message was that the homeland is more than a material environment. This idea recalls that of Renan, already noted by Vincent, which defined the homeland as a *thought*; as far as the future painter was concerned, there was nothing to contradict the idea that his homeland was the land of *paintings*, of art, which he had always loved, and in the buying and selling of which he had had his first professional training. In short, thanks to a partially erroneous interpretation of the notion of homeland as defined by Souvestre, Van Gogh provided himself with a theoretical framework in which he could construct a methodology: becoming an artist meant returning to one's homeland, the homeland of 'paintings' and of the ethic with which he thought art should be imbued, conveying essential, simple values, capable of elevating and consoling mankind. In this rediscovered homeland he wanted to do justice to the beauty of poverty and



8. After Ary Scheffer, *Christus consolator*, 1842; engraving by E. Schuler, Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum

humility, for, as he saw it, they are where we meet God; and it is within them that we find the 'consolation of wounded hearts': the modern Eucharist.

Seen from this perspective, the failure in the Borinage in 1879-80 was not a dead end but a stage; an initiatory period of suffering necessary for a revelation, for a second vocation. The path of artistic creation was a logical next step in his life, which at first sight seemed so chaotic. Thus the Eucharist leads to the Epiphany. Genuine, simple, humble, and requiring a great deal of self-denial, this path was established as the obvious one he had to take – even if this meant eliminating all the other possible paths. He could not help noting the difficulties he experienced in retaining a degree of social standing and in communicating calmly with his neighbour, problems that denied him all hope of finding a job, a 'place', in the art trade. He had not studied beyond the programme he had set himself,

and he knew that he could not suddenly become a baker, as his sister suggested to him.¹²⁰ However, he knew that he was 'good for something' [155]. Finally, his destitution made him face facts: the only talent likely to bear any fruit was his skill with a pencil. He did not yet declare that his work could console anyone – in his early days he confined himself simply to the hope that he could live off what he produced – but everything already predisposed him to take this view.

As early as 1875, he wrote to Theo that 'reading what is well written; on the contrary, that is a *comfort in our lives*.' [56] The work of art he referred to most frequently in his younger years was *Christus consolator* by Ary Scheffer (ill. 8), and he collected and distributed reproductions of it. The world of art was thus, in Vincent's mind, a perfect ally for his Christianity: a parallel and complementary path. Consequently, there was in fact no real break between his state of intense religious fervour and his new occupation as an artist. Van Gogh had taken both paths at the same time, first favouring one, then the other. It is wrong to believe that he first obediently followed the Christian doctrines, and then embraced those of realism. Van Gogh was a rebellious individual, who was never able to defer to one system, because of personal belief and and because of his independence of mind; and that is where his originality resides.

Communion through sentiment

According to Van Gogh, art, if it has the power to console, offers an intimate, touching glimpse of reality; the distress which determined the genesis of a work no longer derives from the individual alone, but forms common ground, shared between the artist and the spectator. The feeling conveyed by this means, which brings the spectator (or the reader) face to face with reality through the artist's righteous intervention, Vincent calls 'true feeling'. The values to which Van Gogh was the most sensitive were of course those that had always preoccupied him: simplicity, genuineness, abnegation, suffering, nature ... This attitude is a secular version of the founding Christian myths of the Eucharist and the Passion. The Eucharist is the ultimate sacrifice, suffering shared by all, heralding death and Christ's eternal life. The humble and the afflicted, those rejected by society, are in the first rank. The needy are those who have need of light, of consolation and of joy. Van Gogh put this idea into practice, depicting with a certain 'feeling' the humble, the poor, the heavy toil of the peasants and the destitution of the least-fortunate industrial workers, such as miners and weavers.

For the painter, a work was well 'felt' when it succeeded in faithfully rendering an aspect of reality, and when the spectator managed to share the emotions of the artist who created it. This 'feeling' seemed to be conveyed essentially by the way the work of art was *crafted*, independently of the thing depicted. Thus, he wrote:

Meryon, even when he's drawing bricks, granite, the iron bars or the parapet of a bridge, puts something of the human soul, shaken by I know not what heartache, into his etching. I've seen drawings of Gothic architecture by V. Hugo. Well, without having Meryon's powerful and masterly execution, there was something of the same sentiment. What is this sentiment? It has some kinship with that which Albrecht Dürer expressed in his *Melancholy*, which in our times James Tissot and M. Maris also have (however different these two may be one from the other). Some profound critic rightly said of James Tissot 'He's a soul in need'. But in any event, there's something of the human soul there; it's for that reason that that is great, immense, infinite, and put Viollet-le-Duc beside it, it's stone, and the other (namely Meryon), that's *Spirit*. Meryon must have had such a power to love that now, like Dickens's Sydney Carton, he loves the very stones of certain places. [158]

In this passage, the 'sentiment' is 'something of the human soul, shaken by I know not what heartache'. Van Gogh used the word sentiment, or feeling, in the same way as Théophile Thoré, through whom he learned about the great Dutch masters. For example, in an article on Hobbema,¹²¹ the French critic wrote: 'With whom did [Hobbema] study? With Salomon Ruysdael? What! We know almost nothing about Salomon himself. With Jacob Ruysdael? They must have known each other, assuredly. From time to time they painted the same views, and there are certain analogies in their techniques; and in their sentiments, too.'¹²² And again: 'For anyone who knows Hobbema well, the thing that most strikes the eye as a sign of recognition, after the mysterious, intimate feeling for nature, and after the exquisite touch [...], is an incomparable quality of colour.'¹²³

This 'sentiment' is perhaps one of the most important keys to reading the work of Van Gogh, even if it is as undefined as his 'it'. It is 'great, immense, infinite', it is '*Spirit*'. This last term is not innocent, written as it is by an evangelist freshly converted to the practice of art. He is undoubtedly talking about the cement which can bind people together, and the raw material for *consolation*. As regards this last term, there is a semantic slide towards an increasingly secular and idiosyncratic meaning, which is difficult to place in a precise system of thought or faith. It is a cement capable of providing a moment's recognition and respite to those people who are worthy of it – and whose life is necessarily difficult, since a difficult life is a condition necessary for worthiness. Van Gogh indeed drew neither for the afflicted and the humble, nor for the rich and powerful. He preached and drew for those who were capable of sharing his *sentiment*. His attempt to get into university convinced him that that lessons taught by a seasonal worker could be more useful than those given in Greek. It is not surprising to see that his aspirations as an artist were on this same level: if his work was to be useful for something, it should be in simplicity of heart and mind, with a real, shared and recognizable sentiment.

So when the artist-painter discovered Naturalist literature in 1882, in The Hague, just after setting up a studio, which he wanted as far as possible to resemble a simple workman's dwelling, the intensity of his motivation was in no way influenced by Emile Zola's theories, and he was not in the least interested in the essential questions of Naturalist theory, such as the analysis of the heredity of a character in a novel. The thing that interested him about Naturalism was its favourite *motif*: the common people, and the *sentiment* with which the popular subjects were rendered.

However, Van Gogh used the term 'Naturalism' and declared that he admired this movement. Sund states that in The Hague, 'His concurrent association with a younger painter, George Hendrik Breitner, encouraged him to expand his artistic repertoire by addressing urban street life – a subject realm that Hague School painters eschewed, but one that novelists like Zola, Daudet and the Goncourts reveled in.'¹²⁴ Now, Van Gogh had been in The Hague for seven months when he read his first Zola novel, and he still had no idea what Naturalism was. However, he was already drawing numerous scenes which, thematically, were identical to Naturalism. Yet it does not seem pertinent to conclude that 'almost from the beginning of his career as a painter, the methods and ideals of Naturalist authors informed Van Gogh's practice: Naturalist narratives and characterizations coloured his experience of the world, and his understanding of the components of Naturalist creativity – direct observation tempered by individual will and imagination – shaped his notion of the process by which experience, configured by a particularized sensibility, spawned art.'¹²⁵

Van Gogh's intellectual and artistic sources went far beyond the framework of Naturalism, and, moreover, his interpretation of Naturalism went beyond the limits of that movement. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the analogies between Van Gogh's preoccupations and Naturalism are numerous. Sund's work provides a remarkable inventory of them. One fundamental point in common is the search for authenticity, for objectivity, which Van Gogh called 'true sentiment'. As stated earlier, this *sentiment* was connected with the crafting of a work, not with what was depicted: the 'heartache of the human soul' could be conveyed by a drawing depicting a building. Several times, Vincent used the expression 'grasp nature at close quarters', in other words seize it and understand it. In order to achieve this, one should not shut oneself away in a studio to paint trees or people, but go out and find the subjects in their natural settings and discover the medium that will best express the reality encountered, without worrying about the exact, photographic depiction of reality.

As Maupassant emphasized in his famous preface to *Pierre et Jean*,¹²⁶ the realists' method was to observe reality and extract what seemed to them to be characteristic. This observation enabled them to create 'typical' characters, that is to say ones which unite the particular characteristics of what they represent. On this

subject, which also preoccupied Alphonse Daudet and many other non-Naturalist writers of this era, Van Gogh wrote in 1886: 'I'm not familiar with Turgenev's books yet, but some time ago I read T.'s biography, which I found very interesting, and how he and Daudet had in common a passion for doing everything from models, summarizing 5 or 6 models in a type.' [557]

However, the first time Van Gogh uses the term *type*, on 5 August 1879, he had not yet read a Naturalist book.¹²⁷ His sources on this precise point of Naturalism, to which one may liken his own beliefs about the nature of types, consequently predate his encounter with Naturalist theories. At the same time, on 19 June of that year, he had stated: 'I know no better definition of the word *Art* than this, "Art is man added to nature", nature, reality, truth, but with a meaning, with an interpretation, with a character that the artist brings out and to which he gives expression, which he sets free, which he unravels, releases, elucidates.' [152]

This short development of Francis Bacon's aphorism¹²⁸ is in perfect accord with Zola's famous phrase in *Mes haines*: 'A work of art is an area of creation seen through a temperament.' This second example, among others, shows that Van Gogh and Naturalism had common sources and sensibilities. On the other hand, it is unlikely that Naturalism as an artistic theory conditioned Van Gogh's artistic production.

One of Naturalism's true influences would be in conflict with the painter's independent mind; he was more sensitive to those who transgressed and went forward than to those who imprisoned themselves in systems. Seen from this perspective, it is not surprising that Vincent said of Guy de Maupassant's *Pierre et Jean* in 1888: 'Am reading Pierre et Jean by Guy de Maupassant. It's beautiful – have you read the preface explaining the freedom the artist has to exaggerate, to create in a novel a more beautiful, simpler, more consoling nature, and explaining what Flaubert's phrase might have meant, "*talent is long patience*" – and originality an effort of will and intense observation?' [588]

Vincent was sensitive to the freedom to 'exaggerate nature' in the name of his own *originality*. It takes work to arrive at this originality. A lot of work, and patience ... Here, Van Gogh encountered an idea that he had espoused five years earlier. In 1883, he had written: 'There's a saying of Gustave Doré's that I've always found exceedingly beautiful – I have the patience of an ox – right away I see something good in it, a certain resolute honesty; in short there's a lot in that saying, it's a real artist's saying.' [400]

The will to produce works showing *typical* aspects was one of the main driving forces of Van Gogh's production. It is only natural to find the painter declaring his taste for a form of literature, known as Naturalist, which shared this preoccupation.

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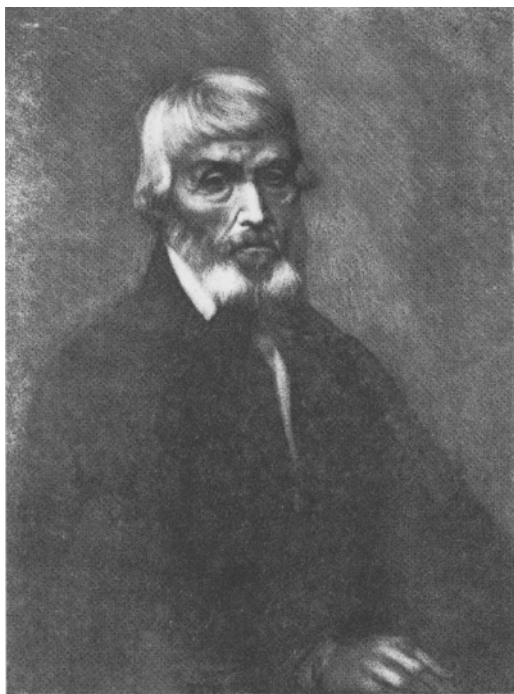
Strategic reading

Carlyle

Griselda Pollock devoted several passages in her essay on Van Gogh's Dutch years to the analogies between the thoughts of Carlyle and those of Van Gogh. According to Pollock, Van Gogh found in Carlyle a way of seeing and describing himself as an artist with an almost mystical vocation.¹²⁹ As Carlyle advocated that it was right to exercise the profession for which one was most gifted, and Van Gogh had made that correct choice, Pollock concluded that there is a relationship of influence between the thinker and the artist. This point of view does not appear to conform to Van Gogh's intellectual realities.

We must take account of the fact that Van Gogh classified the work of Carlyle (along with that of Michelet, Dickens, Hugo, Erckmann-Chatrian and a whole number of other artists) among the testaments to an era he regretted not belonging to, that of the revolutionary France of 1789, 1830 and 1848.¹³⁰ To his friend Van Rappard he wrote on 21 May 1883: 'The French Revolution – that is the centre – the constitution of 1789 the modern gospel, no less sublime than that of Year 1.' [345] Van Gogh placed a huge, mythical distance between himself and these authors. He felt that the heights attained by these great men were beyond his grasp, quite simply because his era, which was too conservative and too soft, did not permit such elevation.

What Van Gogh liked about Carlyle's work related to the artistic sensation rather than the theory of the artist's role: 'A. Gruson, *Histoire des croisades* (Panthéon classique 50 cmes). That's a very beautiful little book, I would almost say that here and there it was written with the sentiment of Thijs Maris (herewith, among other things, a page that struck me), such as when he paints an old castle on a rock with autumnal woods at twilight, with the black fields with a peasant ploughing with a white horse in the foreground, and it also made me think of Michelet and Carlyle.' [134] When Van Gogh used Carlyle for theoretical purposes, it was in order to justify, for example, the fact that he must at all costs marry his cousin Kee Vos. It was in this context that he said that Carlyle was among those



9. Alphonse Legros,
Thomas Carlyle, Bibliothèque
nationale de France, Cabinet
des estampes, Paris

who had the necessary authority to say 'concentrate on one occupation and love one woman' [187]. Later on he would also take up another of Carlyle's aphorisms, 'Blessed is he who has found his work',¹³¹ in order to justify his status as a penniless artist.

After reading *Sartor resartus*, Van Gogh declared that Carlyle had learned a great deal from Goethe, but a good deal more from Jesus Christ, because his text shows a great love for mankind [325]. He addressed this remark to the painter Van Rappard, with whom he had a relationship combining friendship and benevolent competition, a sort of micro-emulation, and to whom he explained his ideas more than he did in his letters to Theo. Here, Van Gogh placed himself in the position of critic with relation to an author, in this case Carlyle, something that he rarely did. Once again, his independence of mind proved too strong to drag him onto paths indicated by anyone but himself. To state that Van Gogh found in Carlyle the possibility of a mystical vocation as an artist is to misunderstand his correspondence. Van Gogh was merely justifying himself by means of quotations from a famous author. As was often the case, his course of action was strategic; we are not seeing his soul laid bare.

Vincent writes to Theo in November 1883: 'Theo, I declare to you that I would rather think about how arms, legs, head attach to a torso than whether or not I

myself am more of an artist or less.' [405] That allows us to discard Pollock's theory concerning the artist Van Gogh's Carlylean vocation. What attracted Van Gogh to Carlyle was not the theoretical basis, but on the contrary the latter's art and taste for pragmatism. In The Hague, he declared that he admired Carlyle's thinking, which according to him was typically English, and that the result of an idea should not be a *sensation* but an *action*.¹³² Finally, in the eyes of Van Gogh – once he has become acquainted with the work and ideas of realists like the Goncourt brothers – Carlyle was not worth the bother of knowing or reading, since his work was merely the equivalent of what Michelet wrote.¹³³ Indeed, as Carlyle's life was nothing but suffering and setbacks, we should prefer the destinies of men who were wise in other ways, such as Delacroix, who died 'almost smiling', because they had their feet firmly on the ground, 'No *idée fixe* about God or abstractions.' [560]

Van Gogh read and admired Carlyle for his elevated prose, his striking statements and his courage, but he did not derive as many grand ideas or artistic theories from this author as one might be led to believe by comparing the two men's ideas. Van Gogh's vocation as an artist was comparable to what led him to want to become a pastor: he saw it as a chance to be 'useful in some way' [155] without betraying himself. He must have recognized clearly that professions that demanded social aptitudes and collective discipline were not for him. He had had experience of this when he was dismissed from Goupil & Co. and when he found that he was not suited to evangelizing the miners of the Borinage.

Van Gogh was too attached to his own beliefs to bend to any collective system – social, commercial or artistic. The example of Pollock's interpretation of Carlyle's influence on Van Gogh indicates a desire to pigeonhole Van Gogh in a specific movement or ideology. This desire, displayed by the majority of authors (Sund, Ködera, Verkade, Erickson) cannot be fulfilled, since Van Gogh constantly strove to flee from any kind of system.

Throughout his intellectual, spiritual and artistic wanderings, Vincent was able to retain and cultivate a rebelliousness and critical sense that were impermeable even to the most strident of voices. Nevertheless, he still displayed great enthusiasm for the theories that surrounded him. As with Maupassant,¹³⁴ he really wanted to admire one theory in particular – as long as he could admire others equally. Stubbornly, he would not accept that anyone but Jesus Christ should claim to possess the truth. On this specific point, it was inevitable that he would come into conflict with the man who was the natural embodiment of authority: his father; and he countered him with a replacement, an intellectual father: Jules Michelet.

Michelet

Michelet is the first French author mentioned in Vincent Van Gogh's correspondence. Impressed by a page by the French historian, which he found in *L'amour*, Van Gogh declared at the end of a letter addressed to friends, in October 1873: 'And now I'll stop; I'm enclosing another picture of autumn, by Michelet.' [14] Now, Michelet was not a painter, and Vincent, who was nineteen, was not one yet. Yet he wrote of an autumn *picture*, written by the one and seen by the other. The page that Van Gogh copied out at the end of this letter is not characteristic of Michelet's work as seen by historians. In it, the author describes a sort of vision: a lady is walking pensively through a flowerless garden, in autumn. Michelet highlights a parallel between the woman and the autumn, then continues his reverie by mentioning paintings seen in Holland and at the Louvre. The lady's face reminds him of them, in that they both share simplicity and elegance.¹³⁵ The few descriptive elements in this page make it difficult to understand the interpretation by Van Gogh, who saw or read it as a picture. The garden is sketched in a few words, and the lady is mainly made up of a series of evocations. We are forced to believe that Van Gogh shared Michelet's *sentiment*, and perceived these lines as a beautiful image of autumn, whose emotion he wanted to share with the recipients of his letter.

The second time Michelet is mentioned, on 21 July 1874, Vincent wrote to Theo: 'Write to me whether you've begun reading Michelet and what you think of it. That book was a revelation to me.' [26] Ten days later, Van Gogh made his thoughts more specific: 'I'm glad you've been reading Michelet and that you really understand it. A book like that at least teaches one to see that there's a lot more to love than people usually think. That book was a revelation and immediately a gospel to me.' [27] A fervent believer at the time he wrote these sentences, Van Gogh did not use the word 'gospel' innocently. The sequel to this correspondence will provide an explanation for this term, since *L'amour* was the work he quoted most frequently in the first two hundred letters, which cover a period of ten years, from 1872 to 1882. These years were without a doubt the most formative for him on an intellectual level, and Van Gogh, who, from nineteen to twenty-nine, would have eleven different addresses in four different countries, who would change jobs six times and experience three vocations, retained one favourite author throughout: Jules Michelet.

At first sight, it seems most unlikely that Van Gogh would have used the word 'gospel' in any sense other than figurative; Jules Michelet was not a propagator of Christian ideas. However, another passage which he devoted to Michelet, in a letter of 23 November 1881, indicates that he intended it very much in the primary sense of the word:



10. Jules Michelet; photograph
by Félix Nadar, 1856

As far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't do without Michelet for anything in the world. All the same, the Bible is eternal and everlasting, but Michelet gives such extremely practical and clear suggestions, immediately applicable to this fast-paced, hectic modern life in which you and I find ourselves, that he makes us progress quickly, and we can't do without him. [...] in my opinion Stowe and Michelet are a *continuation* of the gospel, not a *repetition*. [...] Michelet even says things completely and aloud which the gospel merely whispers to us germinally [...] 'Love on'. That's what I think. [...] Because there is a God there is love; because there is love there is a God. [189]

This passage leaves no room for doubt. Michelet was, in the eyes of Van Gogh, a continuation of the Gospel, a contemporary apostle. His works were the logical sequel to the four Gospels. Vincent did not have a clearly defined or theologically limited view of Christianity, as is shown by his reading of Renan, Hugo or Eliot. What mattered in his eyes was to be able to put into practice the recommendations of Christ, to transform the idea into action; he does not seem to have had a preference for one particular method; on the contrary. He participated in Masses and services of different confessions and created for himself a palette of possibilities for action, not reflection. The debates about the transubstantiation, or Mary's virginity, which were so essential in certain people's eyes, did not matter to him.

Michelet's 'such extremely practical and clear suggestions' would provide Van Gogh with precious assistance at difficult stages in his life. Thus, when he fell in love with his cousin, Kee Vos, who rejected him, he did not miss the opportunity of finding in Michelet's writings all the arguments he needed to justify a stubbornness that defied Kee Vos, his parents, and above all, reality. Later, when he set up home with Sien, a prostitute in The Hague, he resorted to Michelet's work in order to find the right words for his own conjugal happiness, and to derive from it the wisdom which made the impossible union feasible, against everything and everyone.

With regard to these few points, it seems that Van Gogh regarded Michelet not only as a powerful writer, but also as a spiritual guide and trusted moral counsellor. This admiring, religious approach to an author who was first and foremost an historian rather than a writer, and who was often described as anti-Christian, might seem surprising, but it was not absurd or gratuitous. A succinct presentation of the life and work of Michelet, along with a few examples taken from the correspondence, may help us to understand what led Van Gogh to use Michelet's work as he did.

Jules Michelet was born in 1798 in a Paris church, which the Revolution had stripped of its primary function. His father, a printer and fervent republican, was ruined by the press laws of the Empire. The relative poverty which ensued for the Michelets did not prevent them from providing a rigorous education for young Jules, who did not prove ungrateful: he became a doctor of letters at twenty-one. He had a passion for history, undertook numerous research projects, and in the 1830 revolution found the inspiration for his greatest work: the *Histoire de France*. Michelet's intention in this work was to bring the past back to life, make France live like a human being, and rather than being her historian, he attempted to be her biographer. France, according to Michelet, was the fruit of a relationship between a people and a land, whose diversity made the union a success. The ordinary people of France were united by a common plan: the conquest of liberty. The 1789 revolution was an exemplary culmination of this work of liberation, and represented the apogee of nationalist feeling.

The eventual publication of the *Histoire de France* did not take place until 1869, after numerous interruptions and numerous other publications in the interim. One of these interruptions was the publication of the *Histoire de la révolution française*, which, at the outset, was meant only to be a chapter in the *Histoire de France*, and which ended up being an independent work, in seven volumes, and which was to be one of the most influential books on the subject, along with those by Taine and Carlyle. Van Gogh, who admired these two authors, and who regarded the revolutionary Théophile Thoré as an example of a destiny dedicated to a cause that was as noble as it was powerful, was delighted by it.

Alongside his work as a historian, Michelet also published *Le prêtre, la femme, la famille* in 1845, and *Le peuple* in 1846. These two works, designed to educate the

French, were marked by the unbridled lyricism which is also found, to a lesser degree, in his historical works. They were also anti-clerical manifestos, which made him many enemies. In 1849, Michelet married, as his second wife, Athénaïs Mialaret, who was thirty years his junior and whose influence is strongly felt in *L'amour* (1858) and *La femme* (1859). A new lyrical series, in four books that are all hymns to nature, saw the light of day between 1856 and 1868, with the successive publication of *L'oiseau*, *L'insecte*, *La mer* and *La montagne*. Sixteen years after *Le peuple*, he composed two last anti-clerical works, *La sorcière* (1862) and *La bible de l'humanité* (1864). Michelet died in 1874 having begun a three-volume *Histoire du XIXe siècle* in 1871.



Van Gogh was not always sensitive to the style of his favourite writers; he appreciated well-written texts, but his demands on this level were subordinate to the interest which, in his eyes, their content might present. It is therefore difficult to take an exact measure of his taste for Michelet's *lyricism*, which is overshadowed by the enthusiasm he had for his ideas. Nevertheless, a few analogies of form and content between the painter and the historian enable us to get a rough idea of the importance that Van Gogh accorded to the author of *L'oiseau*. The best example to illustrate this admiration is the celebrated first known letter Vincent wrote in French. This letter, the first after a long interruption in his correspondence with Theo, shows several times to what extent Van Gogh adopted the ideological and spiritual influence of Michelet. The first passage that may refer to this is the following:

What moulting is to birds, the time when they change their feathers, that's adversity or misfortune, hard times, for us human beings. One may remain in this period of moulting, one may also come out of it renewed, but it's not to be done in public, however; it's scarcely entertaining, it's not cheerful, so it's a matter of making oneself scarce. Well, so be it. [155]

The image of the bird is relatively common and within anybody's scope. However, it seems that when he wrote this letter, Van Gogh was indeed thinking about Michelet's *L'oiseau*, as a second extract shows:

In the springtime a bird in a cage knows very well that there's something he'd be good for; he feels very clearly that there's something to be done but he can't do it; what it is he can't clearly remember, and he has vague ideas and says to himself, 'the others are building their nests and making their little ones and raising the brood', and he bangs his head against the bars of his cage. And then

the cage stays there and the bird is mad with suffering. 'Look, there's an idler', says another passing bird – that fellow's a sort of man of leisure. And yet the prisoner lives and doesn't die; nothing of what's going on within shows outside, he's in good health, he's rather cheerful in the sunshine. But then comes the season of migration. A bout of melancholy – but, say the children who look after him, he's got everything that he needs in his cage, after all – but he looks at the sky outside, heavy with storm clouds, and within himself feels a rebellion against fate. I'm in a cage, I'm in a cage, and so I lack for nothing, you fools! Me, I have everything I need! Ah, for pity's sake, freedom, to be a bird like other birds!

An idle man like that resembles an idle bird like that.

And it's often impossible for men to do anything, prisoners in I don't know what kind of horrible, horrible, very horrible cage. There is also, I know, release, belated release. [155]

Van Gogh used the image of a bird in a cage to express the social position in which he believed he found himself. At the age of twenty-seven he had still not accomplished anything that might win him the respect of his family and his relations. He had just accepted financial assistance from Theo, because he was no longer able to fund his own needs. In order to parry any criticism, he compared those who might consider him idle or a sponger to birds who are free and have no cares, and are incapable of understanding the distress of a captive who is lodged and fed. He thus offered Theo a certain form of exclusivity: by confiding in him the true nature of his state, which only Theo was capable of understanding, he placed his brother above any detractors. By this means he assured himself of an income: Theo must not allow himself to be taken in by people who were incapable of understanding reality! This procedure, a strategic mechanism consisting of anticipating criticism by using a literary shield, was to be repeated throughout the correspondence.

In *L'oiseau*, Michelet devoted a passage to a chaffinch in a cage, which presents striking analogies with Van Gogh's text.

Lower, very much lower, in a narrow cage, a bird somewhat larger in size, very inhumanly confined, gave me a curious and quite opposite impression. This was a chaffinch, and the first which I had seen blind. No spectacle could be more painful [...] His attitude of labour and torture rendered his song very painful to me. The worst of it is that it was human; it reminded one of the turns of the head and the ungracious motions of the shoulders which short-sighted persons, or men become blind, indulge in. Such is never the case with those born blind [...] This unhappy virtuoso, whose song, like himself, was dissembled and deformed, had been a mean image of the ugliness of the

slave-artist, if not ennobled by that indomitable effort to pursue the light, seeking it always on high, and ever centering his song in the invisible sun which he had treasured up in his soul.¹³⁶

In both passages, from Van Gogh's letter and from Michelet's book, the image of a bird is placed alongside the image of a man, whose abilities and nature demand an environment other than a prison. The two texts echo each other: in Van Gogh's text, the bird serves as a metaphor for an indecisive man, who, even if he does now know exactly what he wants, senses strongly that he cannot blossom in a prison, despite the good offices of his benevolent jailers; in Michelet's text, the man serves as a metaphor for a blind bird, whose sad and painful song, in the cage, will never be what it is in its natural setting – which is freedom and nothing else. Van Gogh the artist could not fail to be touched by this image of the artist as a slave, restrained by the perverse effects of the defiant attitude towards him of those around him. The two passages are punctuated by a short sentence introduced in French by the word 'tel' (such): 'An idle man like that resembles an idle bird like that' recalls 'Such is never the case with those born blind'. These comparative and affirmative phrases are strongly present in the work of Michelet. He also wrote in *L'oiseau*: 'As with the bird, so with man. That is the universal impression.'¹³⁷ In his other works, this procedure constantly recurs, as it does in Van Gogh's letters. French was not Van Gogh's native language, and while it is pointless to speculate about his training in this language, it is certain that he maintained his ability to speak it by reading numerous French authors. Thus, when he picked up an author's style, it may not have been deliberate but through necessity.

The third extract (part of which was quoted in the previous chapter) shows that *L'oiseau* was not the only one of Michelet's works to have inspired Van Gogh.

Someone, to give an example, will love Rembrandt, but seriously, that man will know there is a God, he'll believe firmly in Him.

Someone will make a deep study of the history of the French Revolution – he will not be an unbeliever, he will see that in great things, too, there is a sovereign power that manifests itself.

Someone will have attended, for a time only, the free course at the great university of poverty, and will have paid attention to the things he sees with his eyes and hears with his ears, and will have thought about it; he too, will come to believe, and will perhaps learn more about it than he could say.

Try to understand the last word of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces; there will be God in it. Someone has written or said it in a book, someone in a painting. [155]

The stylistic procedure Van Gogh used was perhaps not taken from Michelet, but it was certainly of a literary nature. Here, Van Gogh was trying to convince Theo that God manifests Himself in great artists, great works and great events, and he did this by putting forward a series of examples that set out his idea, juxtaposed in distinct paragraphs. His arguments were all present in the work of Michelet.

The first argument concerns Rembrandt. Like Vincent, Michelet was a great admirer of Rembrandt. In *L'oiseau*, the following passage illustrates this admiration very well:

Rembrandt in his paintings has exhausted the effects, at once warm and soft, of the science of *chiaro-oscuro*. The nightingale begins his song when the gloom of evening mingles with the last beams of the sun; and hence it is that we tremble at his voice. Our soul in the misty and uncertain hours of the gloaming regains possession of the inner light.¹³⁸

In the second example used in his argument, Van Gogh refers to 'Someone [who] will make a deep study of the history of the French Revolution.' Now, at the start of this same letter, he had written: 'So I studied the books I had to hand rather seriously, such as the Bible and Michelet's *La révolution Française*, and then last winter, Shakespeare and a little V. Hugo and Dickens and Beecher Stowe, and then recently Aeschylus, and then several other less classic authors, several good minor masters.' Van Gogh is referring to his own experience: his 'deep study' of the 1789 Revolution took place notably through studying the work Michelet had devoted to this event. When, consequently, he mentions the idea of a sovereign power that manifests itself in the 1789 revolution, it is undeniably Michelet's work which has inspired it.

In the third argument he puts forward, the Gospel and Michelet mingle to the point where Van Gogh has no hesitation in speaking about 'the great university of poverty', whose lessons benefit the man who hears with his ears and sees with his eyes. This argument recalls a passage from *Le peuple*: 'The pre-eminent, essential trait which always struck me most, in my long study of the people, is that, among the chaos of neglect, the vices of poverty, I found a wealth of feeling and a kindness of heart, very rare among the wealthy classes.'¹³⁹ Van Gogh mixes in a Biblical reference: 'And the eyes of them that see shall not be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken.'¹⁴⁰

Vincent was already sensitive to this parallel six years earlier. On 31 July 1874, he declared: 'And then a chapter like The longing for autumn, how rich it is. [...] And that a woman and a man can become *one*, that is, *one whole* and not two halves, that I believe too.' [27] This was a reference to the following passage from Genesis, which is echoed several times in the Gospels: 'Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.'¹⁴¹

Michelet had always been resolutely anti-clerical, but he was not an atheist. He declared his belief in a higher being, a creator, several times. It is difficult in Michelet's work to grasp where philosophy and history stop, and religion starts. In *Le peuple*, he wrote:

The child will know the world, but he must first know himself, –the best part of himself, –I mean France. The rest he will learn from her. It will be for her to initiate him, and tell him her traditions. She will tell him the three revelations she has received, how Rome taught her the Just, Greece the Beautiful, and Judea the Holy. She will connect her last lesson with the first lesson that his mother gave him: the latter taught him *God*, and his great mother will teach him the dogma of love, –*God in Man*, –Christianity; –and how love, impossible in the barbarous, malevolent times of the middle ages, *was inscribed in the laws*, by the Revolution, *so that the inward God of man might be manifested*.¹⁴²

Michelet, declared Van Gogh, really presents himself as a continuation of the Gospels, since without denying the theses defended by Christ, he transposes their values into his own time. God manifests Himself in men and events, here and now, by means of love. It is not surprising to see Van Gogh close his argument with a sentence marked by the stylistic influence of Michelet: 'tel l'a écrit ou dit dans un livre et tel dans un tableau' ('someone has written or said it in a book, someone in a painting'), which confirms that for Van Gogh, the artist possesses a creative force that endows him with a kind of divinity, and consequently enables him to glimpse 'the infinite'.

When he wrote that letter, Van Gogh was in a social and professional impasse. It was his last chance to make a career as a man of the church, a status to which he had aspired since the failure of his career as an art dealer. This made him realize that even at the most practical level of organized Christianity, that is to say evangelization, his way of living out his faith, which rested entirely on imitating the life of Christ, was not accepted. In Book V of his *Histoire de France* Michelet offered powerful praise for *The imitation of Jesus Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, whom he admired for his purity, his greatness of soul and his edifying power. Thus, reading Michelet enabled Van Gogh to remain faithful to the principles he had loved in Christianity while rejecting the church: In *Des jésuites*, Michelet stated: 'The middle ages has said in its last work, the *Imitation* – "God speaks, and the doctors are silent."¹⁴³ It was also through Michelet that he was able to become acquainted with the woman whose work he regarded as another continuation of the Gospels: Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's cabin*. Michelet had written in the introduction to *L'amour*: 'The greatest success of the age is that of a woman's book, Mrs. Stowe's novel – the gospel of liberty for a race, translated into all tongues.'¹⁴⁴

Having a firm faith in an absolute power, according to contemporary precepts that were immediately applicable to modern life; and following the message of Christ without subscribing to doctrines pre-ordained by any organization: this was the programme that Van Gogh wished to follow as he turned to art. So, at this turning point in the summer of 1880, his spiritual and artistic methodology found intellectual and practical justification in the work of Jules Michelet, which enabled him to change course without betraying his profound aspirations. As George Eliot had shown with *Felix Holt, the radical*, Christianity did not have a monopoly on Christian values.



Using Michelet to justify himself at a moment as decisive as the summer of 1880, when Vincent decided to become an artist, was not an isolated phenomenon. In the correspondence, references to Michelet are generally encountered at moments in Van Gogh's life when he had the most need of an intellectual framework and moral references to defend his behaviour or his decisions.

For example, a very significant moment for Van Gogh was his fruitless attempt to marry Kee Vos, his first cousin, the mother of a young child and recently widowed. During this period, the future painter's correspondence takes on an unappealing aspect: Van Gogh wrote his longest letters in November and December 1881, and they are almost exclusively devoted to his impossible love for Kee. The arguments put forward in them are dubious and obscure, for the most part resting on the following contention: Kee Vos has replied 'no, nay, never' to Vincent's request to share her life with him, and he must *consequently* 'love on' so that love may triumph and he may find happiness.

Now, Van Gogh found 'love on' in Michelet's work and used it to justify himself. According to Michelet, woman is changeable in her moods, but constant in her love. And in each woman, whatever her age, a young girl full of freshness is hiding, and it is this presence that makes her loveable to the end of her days. So there is no such thing as an old woman; more, and always, and once again, one must love this woman who has a thousand actions, a thousand faces, but a single soul: the same one she had when she was a young girl. Van Gogh constructed a very personal interpretation of this argument for himself, and set it out with disconcerting assurance. According to him, there are three possible 'states' between two individuals. The first state is that of two individuals who do not love each other. The second state is that of one individual who loves, and who is not loved in return. The third state is that of an individual who loves, and who is loved in return. This third state is the ideal. Van Gogh stated that he consoled himself with being in the second state, for it could have been worse: he could have been in the

first state. In order to attain the third state and marry Kee, there was only one solution: he must be loved in return by Kee. The only means he could glimpse of attaining Kee's love was to 'love on' despite the difficult circumstances, which he had no doubt would develop in his favour.

To convince everyone of the rightness of his words, he quoted Michelet endlessly, to the point where, right in the middle of a letter written in Dutch, he switched to a style of French that resembles a pastiche of Michelet:

Perhaps you remember that we talked this summer about the question of women, both with a kind of despondency. That we felt, or thought we felt, something like, Woman is the desolation of the righteous man.¹⁴⁵ [...]

Not I but *père* Michelet says to all young men like you and me, '*a woman must breathe upon you if you're to be a man*'. She has breathed upon me, my dear chap! What do you mean? Because three times she has answered 'never'. That, my dear chap, is one of their ways of breathing upon a monster, and there's the monster who turns into a man! For love of her! She and no other!

Do you understand, my dear chap?

In the same way and conversely must 'a man breathe upon a woman if she is to be a woman'? I think so very certainly. If you ask me,

How to breathe on her? Here's my clear and simple answer,

By setting against her 'never' these other words, 'my dear, I love you and you will love me, may God help us'. One must have loved, and have fallen out of love, and love on! Do you understand, my dear chap? [...]

No! where is thy sting? Never, where is thy victory! To love again, it is God's will! Do you understand my dear chap? [181]

Van Gogh did not write like a logician. If on the subject of religion he was surprisingly accurate in his analysis of Michelet's work, in love he undoubtedly lacked the necessary distance to grasp the text fully, a text that nowhere states that it is possible, less still desirable, to force a woman to love a man. As for Van Gogh, he coerced Michelet's text, editing it at opportune moments, in order to legitimize his behaviour. Did the power of his feelings hinder his ability to understand the meaning of Michelet's text clearly? One has to suspect so. It is more likely that the painter was content to read into Michelet what he wanted to read, and that he extracted from his work whatever would serve his cause, thus misappropriating a text that enabled him to defend his position, according to a tried and tested pattern, with the opinion of a man whom he himself classified as superior.

The Kee Vos affair, which ended in failure, left unpleasant memories in Pastor Van Gogh's family. The parents of Vincent and Theo, as well as Kee's parents, opposed Vincent's plans fiercely, and in particular the relations between Van

Gogh father and son were stretched to the limit. The two men were deaf to each other's points of view. Vincent declared on 18 November 1881:

If, for example, Pa sees me with a French book by Michelet or V. Hugo in my hand, he thinks of arsonists and murderers and 'immorality'. But that's just too silly, and of course I don't let idle talk of that kind upset me. I've already said so often to Pa: just read a book like this, even if only a couple of pages, and you'll be moved by it. *But Pa stubbornly refuses to do so.* [186]

Not just Vincent's love for Kee, but also Vincent's reading matter was disastrous in the eyes of the Pastor. Michelet, whose *L'oiseau*, *La mer* or *L'insecte* might have constituted an area of understanding, became a subject of discord between father and son. Now, Michelet was also someone who knew how to apply the message of the Gospels, the seeds of which are contained in his work, to modern life. Van Gogh senior, on the other hand, was a pastor, a preacher, a man whose vocation and mission was to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. Two competitors with the same mission, and at the centre, torn between the two, was a disciple who had no hesitation: 'I also told Pa frankly that in the circumstances I valued Michelet's advice more than his, and had to choose which of the two I should follow.' [186]

To qualify the positions taken by his parents and his family, Van Gogh often used the term 'jesuitism'. It is difficult to state that the painter derived this term from the work of Michelet, as Dutch Protestants traditionally had a difficult relationship with the Jesuits, but Michelet, the atheist and republican, could only reinforce Vincent's beliefs. The historian had always been fiercely opposed to the Jesuits, whom he regarded as intriguers and evil-doers, and to whom, in collaboration with Quinet, he devoted his virulent *Des jésuites* (1843). In the stormy period of the Kee affair, Van Gogh spoke of 'Père Michelet': a modern apostle and a paternal figure, capable of giving the advice Vincent needed, which his biological father was incapable of giving him.

Once the storm caused by the Kee affair has died down, Van Gogh set up home in The Hague, in order to establish a studio where he could perfect his technique and, eventually, earn his living as an artist. Here, he met another woman, Sien, a pregnant prostitute and mother to a young daughter. He fell for her, moved her into his lodgings and fed her with the money Theo sent him. At first, Van Gogh hid his cohabitation from his family and his acquaintances, but the truth swiftly emerged, and he found himself having to explain to Theo why he had hidden Sien's existence from him; and above all, why Theo had to feed a household of three individuals when he thought he was only supplying the needs of his brother. Vincent also found himself having to explain his situation to his parents, who, one suspects, did not see this relationship in a good light. As at the time of the Kee Vos affair, Van Gogh appealed to Michelet in order to extricate himself

from this awkward situation, writing in May 1882: 'two people living together need less than one alone' [225]. He had already used this argument for the Kee affair. He was merely repeating Michelet, who declares in the introduction to *L'amour*: 'Two persons spend less than one.'¹⁴⁶

Michelet went even further: the stability of the household avoids excesses through the saving constraints of the family, which means that even four individuals spend less than one. The Van Gogh household would also number four, as Sien already had a child as well as the one she was carrying when she met Vincent. Thus, the artist was able to make the truths spoken by Michelet his own, and sought, if not to apply them, at least to use them to make Theo admit that there was nothing scandalous or irresponsible in his choice to live with Sien.



The aspect of Michelet's work that Van Gogh first highlighted was the quality of his prose. He copied and re-copied several times the passage from 'Aspirations de l'automne',¹⁴⁷ a chapter of *L'amour*, not so much for the moral message it contained or the intellectual position it defended, but for its literary quality. Michelet comparison of the lady walking in a garden to two paintings, one by Philippe de Champagne the other by Van Dyck, was doubtless what particularly pleased Van Gogh. Using an observed reality alongside a remembered picture was a procedure that Van Gogh would himself use frequently. Throughout his correspondence, he would tell the recipients of his letters about his admiration for authors able to paint pictures in words, like Zola, Eliot, Flaubert or the Goncourt brothers. This admiration contained a degree of identification. Van Gogh was not himself seeking to paint what he read, but from the texts he read he derived a process that he wished to appropriate in his work as an artist. Thus, in 1882, he said of Michelet with regard to his work *Le peuple* (1846):

The book was written quickly and evidently in haste, and if it was all one read by M. I believe one wouldn't find it very beautiful, or one would be less struck by it. Knowing the more carefully worked books like *La femme*, *L'amour*, *La mer* and *L'histoire de la revolution*, I found it to be like a rough sketch by a painter I like very much, and as such it had a special charm.

I, for one, find M.'s way of working enviable. I don't doubt for a moment that there will be many writers who disapprove of M.'s technique, just as some painters believe they have the right to find fault with Israël's technique. M. feels strongly, and what he feels he slaps on without troubling himself in the least about how he does it, and without thinking in the least about 'technique' or generally accepted forms, except in so far as he casts it into one form or another

such that it's comprehensible to those who wish to comprehend. In my view, though, *Le peuple* is less a first thought or impression than an unfinished but yet deliberate conception well thought-out in advance. Some fragments were evidently done in haste from nature and added to other parts that are more worked and studied. [312]

Van Gogh, who was settled in his studio in The Hague when he wrote this passage, continued to develop his preference for coarse but truly felt passages, and declared his contempt for the dumb finesse of the academic reproduction of reality, which betrayed nature by wanting to correct it in favour of beauty. It would seem, moreover, that this was the main reproach directed at him by those around him: his work was disorganized and done too hastily. By presenting Theo with the work of Michelet as being done in haste, he shielded himself from these criticisms. For if his detractors, notably Mauve and Tersteeg, could, as successful elders, easily attack the young Van Gogh, it was impossible for them to attack Michelet, at least in Vincent's eyes. However, Van Gogh made only a strategic use of this aspect of Michelet's work. He admired Michelet's imperfect style for its very imperfection, because it gave him a stronger feeling of the man behind the artist.

Van Gogh read Michelet avidly and frequently, and at important moments, he used the historian's work in his correspondence, although his support was not total. Whether it was in his personal life, in his writing, in his intellectual development or in his artistic career, even in a position where he ought, through admiration and enthusiasm, to have been easiest to influence, Van Gogh seems to have followed his own path. He gained intellectual and spiritual nourishment from Michelet's work – but above all from what he already firmly believed before reading it.

He liked and read into Michelet what he came to like and read into Zola: a strong voice, and opinions that were clear, simple and 'applicable'. Also, he used Michelet, like the other authors he mentioned, only to justify positions or behaviour after the fact. Van Gogh never announced that he was going to do something *because* Michelet, or some other author, had written that it was appropriate to act that way. On the contrary, there are numerous passages in Michelet's work, which we know Van Gogh read, which are completely contradictory to the Dutch artist's stance. In this sense, he may have considered Michelet's work as a gospel, but that gospel was far from having the force of law. Contrary to what fanatical reading can produce, Van Gogh did not erase his own personality in favour of the author's. Van Gogh's admiration for Michelet was not absolute or blind, and the 'practical advice' he derived from his work were often used by him to reinforce his own ideas. Indeed, this admiration enabled him essentially to set up as a master a man from whose lessons he chose selectively, the principal among them being that it is good and right to defend the message of Christ by defying Christianity.

Zola

When Van Gogh left the family home to move to The Hague, he no longer had any trust in the judgements of his father or of pastors in general. He wrote:

But my feelings for K.V. are completely new and something entirely different. Without knowing it, she's in a kind of prison. She's also poor and can't do everything she wants, and you see, she has a kind of resignation and I think that the Jesuitisms of clergymen and devout ladies often make more of an impression on her than on me, Jesuitisms that no longer impress me for the very reason that I've learned a few tricks. But she adheres to them and couldn't bear it if the system of resignation and sin and God and whatnot appeared to be a conceit.

And I don't think it occurs to her that perhaps God only actually begins when we say those words with which Multatuli closes his prayer of an unbeliever: 'O God, there is no God'. Look, I find the clergymen's God as dead as a doornail. But does that make me an atheist? The clergymen think me one – be that as it may – but look, I love, and how could I feel love if I myself weren't alive and others weren't alive? And if we live, there's something wondrous about it. Call it God or human nature or what you will, but there's a certain something that I can't define in a system, even though it's very much alive and real, and you see, for me it's God or just as good as God. [193]

His ideas now had a foil. He set life, truth, freedom, light and love against everything represented by 'pastors' and their 'jesuitisms': darkness, death, confinement, bad faith, ignorance and stupidity. Basically, he set the indefinable 'it' ('...a certain something that I can't define in a system, even though it's very much alive and real, and you see, for me it's God or just as good as God.'), the subject of his artistic preoccupations, against the world of certainties, systems and dogmas. From this perspective, it is perhaps easier to define Van Gogh's artistic, spiritual or intellectual positions by the negative: Van Gogh was touched by that which was neither dead, nor false, nor certain, nor empty, nor perfectly defined. The painter was searching for mankind rather than for a system, and behind an artistic work he sought for the individual who created it; he wanted what was living and real, which he set against the dead and the theoretical. The idea that Van Gogh took up the Naturalist creed, 'art is a corner of nature seen through a temperament', is consequently attractive but incorrect: Van Gogh did not wait until he had discovered Zola to implement such an approach to art.

In 1882, Van Gogh won his spiritual independence by detaching himself from the 'God of the pastors', and his intellectual independence by declaring that he preferred the advice of 'great men' like Michelet to that of his father. He also



11. Emile Zola,
photograph by
Félix Nadar

put artistic and personal distance between himself and his first ‘teacher’, Anton Mauve, though without denying his talent. In this dynamic turn towards emancipation, he could not fail to take a lively interest in the disturbing and modern Zola. When he discovered this author, Van Gogh, filled with enthusiasm for his strong, poetic voice, hastily read everything he could find by the same hand. The fact that Zola was regarded by a number of right-thinking Dutch people as a veritable pestilence¹⁴⁸ could only have encouraged him to read on. Naturally, the trainee painter was particularly moved by the approach, the spirit and the subjects of writings by the inventor of literary Naturalism.

We find the first explicit reference to a book by Zola in a letter of July 1882: ‘In “Une page d’amour” by Emile Zola I found several townscapes painted or drawn in a masterly, masterly fashion – entirely in the sentiment of the simple passage in your letter. And that small book by him is why I’m very definitely going to read everything by Zola.’ [244] It is futile to speculate as to how this novel by Zola

reached Van Gogh. Sund has summed up the situation very well: 'An entire generation of writers and painters was immersing itself in recent French fiction at The Hague in the 1880s, urged on by some of the city's most prominent critics. It is hardly surprising that Van Gogh became swept up in the tide of this enthusiasm.'¹⁴⁹

Nevertheless, further on Sund suggests that Van Gogh may already have been familiar with Zola's theoretical texts, such as *Mes haines*, before coming to The Hague. Now, Van Gogh would not have omitted to mention these writings explicitly if he had indeed read them. *Mes haines*, *Mon salon* and other texts focusing on art are so close to Van Gogh's preoccupations that it is totally unfeasible that he would not have mentioned them if he had read them. Moreover, it would still take Van Gogh a long time before he understood what Impressionism was. This lack of knowledge makes it impossible that he could have read the texts Sund assumes he would have consulted.

The example of *Mes haines*, which came out in 1866, is explicit. In the foreword Zola wrote:

In the painting (the work of art) I seek, I love the man – the artist.

Our artists are no longer those generous, powerful men, healthy of mind and vigorous in body, like Veronese and Titian. The entire cerebral machine has broken down. The nerves have become dominant, the blood has thinned, the weary, weak hands no longer seek to create anything but hallucinations of the brain.

Today we paint thoughts, as in the past we painted bodies. An unhealthy ecstasy has given birth to men like Ary Scheffer. [...]

The only genius of this era, Eugène Delacroix, suffered from an acute neurosis, he painted as one writes, recounting all the burning fevers of his nature. [...]

I know that the word 'trade' frightens these gentlemen; they do not want to be workmen, and yet that is all they should be.

What I am complaining about is that not one of them has the bold, masterly brush of a true workman, of the man working in the thick of things with no fear of being spattered. [...]

Ah! [...] if our painters lived as fighters, as powerful, vigorous men, if they learned their trade, if they forgot the ideal and remembered nature, if the public consented to be intelligent and to stop booing new personalities, we might see other works on the walls of the exhibition halls, works that are human and alive, deeply true and interesting.¹⁵⁰

The ideas and terms used here are so close to Van Gogh's preoccupations that it seems impossible that he never spoke of them to Theo, to whom he entrusted so

many intimate thoughts and artistic ideas. However, there is not the slightest trace of a reference to this text in Van Gogh's correspondence as a source of inspiration or knowledge.

Both of them products of and active in the same era, Zola and Van Gogh shared points of view and ideas; their works are comparable, but to state that Vincent was a Naturalist painter is to do the painter the injustice that he did to Flaubert by classifying him as a Naturalist;¹⁵¹ Zola formulated ideas whose paternity he shared with others, including Flaubert. When Van Gogh placed Flaubert in the Naturalist school, he unjustly cut off the author of *Madame Bovary* from the originality of his art, while at the same time proving his total lack of interest in the classification of authors into literary movements. For the painter, theories are never worth as much as reality. His most important teacher is nature, which includes 'the great university of poverty', from which one must detach, disentangle or extract something indeterminate, whose essence is divine. As he himself said: 'there will be God in it'. From this point of view, the influence of Naturalism on Van Gogh must be put into perspective. Van Gogh seemed not to be aware of what precisely Zola's school corresponded to. Moreover, Van Gogh uses the terms 'realist', 'naturalist' and 'modern author' randomly, more in opposition to romanticism than to designate a precise movement. There is nothing peculiar to Van Gogh about this attitude; Zola himself shared this artificial conception of a break between romanticism and realism, which no one has ever succeeded in locating in time or space, or in a list of authors.

Moreover, when Van Gogh wrote in July 1883 that he was reading *Mes haines*,¹⁵² it was to say that Zola was wrong. If he had already read this work, which was disappointing in his eyes, would he have taken the trouble to read it again? If, inexplicably, he had re-read it anyway, he would have said so. All in all, there is no evidence that Van Gogh had read anything by Zola that could have influenced him intellectually before July 1882, when he mentioned that he had read *Une page d'amour*.

However, the analogies between Zola and Van Gogh are striking, and Van Gogh set about reading Zola avidly. But Van Gogh's independent way of thinking was at least as strong as his admiration for the French novelist; he went so far as to mock him for his superficial artistic opinions. Indeed, the painter placed himself *alongside* the Naturalists and the other realists, in demanding with them, as an ideology, a vision of the future that was at once utopian and vague. He was Zola's fellow-traveller rather than one of his disciples. In accord with Zola and the Goncourts, he felt that he was an 'overgrown child':

Well there's still this – I believe – one feels instinctively that a tremendous amount is changing, and everything will change. We're in the last quarter of a century that will end with another colossal revolution.

But suppose we both yet see the beginning of it at the end of our lives.

We'll certainly not experience the better times of clear air and refreshment of

the whole of society after those great storms. All the same, it's something not to be taken in by the falseness of one's time, in so far as one detects in it the unhealthy closeness and mugginess of the hours that precede the thunderstorm.

And says – it's oppressive for us – but the next generations will be able to breathe more freely. Men like Zola and the De Goncourts believe in it with the simplicity of overgrown children. They, the most rigorous analysts – whose diagnosis is both so merciless and so accurate. [560]

In the works of Zola, Van Gogh sought to feel the man, as he did with Flaubert, Vermeer or Monticelli. He did not seek Naturalism in them. As Sund states elsewhere, the idea of 'seeking the artist through his work' does not come from Zola.¹⁵³ Van Gogh had never done anything other than look for the men behind the works. Early on, in the Bible, was it not the person of Jesus Christ – whom he regarded as an artist – that he was seeking? It was the same with the painters he admired, like Rembrandt, Delacroix or Millet:

Oh well. Listen, Theo, what a man that Millet was! I have the big work by Sensier on loan from De Bock. It interests me so much that I wake up at night and light the lamp and go on reading. Because during the day I have to work. [...]

Here you have a few words that struck me and moved me in Sensier's Millet, sayings of Millet.

Art is a battle – you have to put your whole life into art.

One must work like a bunch of negroes.

I'd rather say nothing than express myself weakly.

It was only yesterday that I read that last saying of Millet, but I'd felt the same before then, which is why I sometimes feel the need to scratch in what I feel not with a soft brush but a hard carpenter's pencil and a pen. Watch out! Tersteeg! Watch out! You're clearly wrong. [210]

This passage, among others, shows just how sensitive Van Gogh was to the question of 'seeking the artist through his work' well *before* he knew of Zola's reflections on that subject. It is also very revealing that this passage is taken from a letter designed to convince Theo of the rightness of a course of action liable to make a bad impression: Tersteeg, the family friend, had just visited Van Gogh in The Hague, where he had found, in addition to a studio, a pregnant woman and a child. Before Tersteeg carried this news to Theo, Van Gogh hastily explained to his brother that that woman who was living with him acted as his model, that she helped him with the household chores, and that he considered that, as an artist

should live like a workman, there was no reason why he should not have a family like a workman. Van Gogh even seemed to consider it necessary for the artist to have a family life; that he had simple, secure and honest values, because it was as an artistic workman that he would arrive at the best result. In this respect, Millet was his greatest example, since this peasants' son never denied his peasant roots and remained attached to his land and to its values throughout his life; exactly like Van Gogh, who would always feel that he had the identity of a peasant from Brabant.

How could this man, who had committed himself body and soul to drawing and painting, not be sensitive to quotations from Millet? To 'work like a bunch of negroes' and 'put your whole life into it' was in perfect accord with the idea that Van Gogh had of his profession, whose key values were simplicity, work, authenticity and self-denial. Moreover, Millet, 'what a man', was a virile, intransigent man, faithful to his beliefs, the enemy of compromise, of partisan takeovers and academic dogmas.

However, Van Gogh would later proclaim that Zola's books had strongly influenced his work: 'But what does that do to us, we've read *La terre* and *Germinal*, and if we paint a peasant we'd like to show that this reading has in some way become part of us.' [663]

Nevertheless, the simple fact of allowing a work of art to influence the creation of another work of art is anything but Naturalist. Thus, paradoxically, by proclaiming the influence of Zola here, Van Gogh showed that he was not a disciple of his school. Van Gogh was impressed by the writer Zola and by his works. He *admired* his methods and shared some of his subjects, but did not base his painting on Naturalist theories. Van Gogh retained the stories and the descriptions and admired the overall plan, but he did not show that he understood anything about Zola's scientific and experimental concerns. His first impression would undoubtedly remain the most important: he considered the urban landscapes in *Une page d'amour* 'painted or drawn in a masterly, masterly fashion' [244]: it was Zola's art that Vincent admired, not his method.¹⁵⁴

The attraction exerted on Van Gogh by Naturalist works is thus explained by reasons other than his sensitivity to Naturalism. Van Gogh projected his own conceptions onto Naturalism, assimilated part of what Naturalism was able to offer him, and, by making himself the defender of Zola's ideas, he made Zola the defender of his own beliefs.

Beyond realism: a modern gospel?

There is a key passage in a letter of November 1882, which enables us to understand clearly how Van Gogh combined a personal and independent faith with

realism in literature. The search for the real, a characteristic of realism, was transformed in Van Gogh into a search for the absolute, which was to be extracted from reality. A good artist, like Israëls, was capable of feeling and sharing this reality, and thus, despite himself, shows the existence of God.

It seems to me that a painter has a duty to try to put an idea into his work. I was trying to say this in this print – but I can't say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror – that it seems to me that one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the existence of 'something on high' in which Millet believed, namely in the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality that there can be in the expression of an old man like that, without his being aware of it perhaps, as he sits so quietly in the corner of his hearth. At the same time something precious, something noble, that can't be meant for the worms.

Israëls has done it so very beautifully. Perhaps the most wonderful passage in Uncle Tom's cabin is the one where the poor slave, sitting by his fire for the last time and knowing that he must die, remembers the words

Let cares like a wild deluge come,
And storms of sorrow fall,
May I but safely reach my home,
My god, my Heaven, my All.

This is far from all theology – simply the fact that the poorest woodcutter, heath farmer or miner can have moments of emotion and mood that give him a sense of an eternal home that he is close to. [288]

Thus, art is not a slave to any method or theory, but aims to highlight the reality of the existence of a higher power. What Van Gogh proposed was no less than to reveal God through a moment comparable to an epiphany: he proposed that the person viewing his work should be able to see the eternal in the most common things, in the image of the discovery of the infant Jesus by the three wise men. He could not reveal God by trickery, or by seeking only pretty, pleasing effects. Van Gogh was convinced that by 'putting your whole life into it', like Millet, he became the medium of a divine revelation. When Van Gogh used types, recognizable representatives of a category, capable of conveying *feeling*, it was to serve this idea of an epiphany. His obsession with consolation also led to this idea: participation as an artist in a modern, applicable, just, comforting evangelical revelation, which fit into a system of values that was centred on genuineness, simplicity, work and self-denial. Vincent applied himself entirely to the service of this vital search for a modern epiphany.

In a later letter, after describing paintings that had made an impression upon him, he wrote:

The dramatic effect of these paintings is something that helps us to understand 'a corner of nature seen through a temperament' and that helps us understand that the principle of 'man added to nature' is needed more than anything else in art, and one finds the same thing in Rembrandt's portraits, for example – it's more than nature, more like a revelation. And it seems good to me to respect that, and to keep quiet when it's often said that it's overdone or a manner. [361]

This passage shows clearly that Zola's theory was being used to serve something other than what Naturalism proposed. Zola wanted to strive for objectivity *despite* the man, and deep down, Van Gogh had nothing to do with objectivity. What mattered for him was the 'revelation', the 'more than nature'. In this period, he was beginning to use the term 'ray' to designate this indefinable absolute which God reveals. He borrowed it from Michelet:

One will be able to raise one's conscience to a level of development such that it will become the voice of a better and higher I that is the master of the ordinary I. And one won't relapse into scepticism or cynicism, not become one of the vile mockers.

Not at once. Michelet puts it beautifully, and those few words by M. say everything I mean, 'Socrates was born a real satyr, but through devotion, work, renunciation of frivolous things, he changed himself so completely that on his last day, before his judges and facing death, there was in him something of a god, a ray from on high, with which the Parthenon was illuminated.'

Well, one sees the same thing in Jesus too, who began as an ordinary labourer and worked his way up to be something else, whatever it may have been, a personality so full of compassion, love, goodness, seriousness, that one is still drawn to it. [368]

Here, ugliness becomes *sublime*, through work, dedication and renunciation. This sublime quality leads directly to a beauty whose essence is divine. The parallel between Socrates and Jesus is surprising in that Socrates had the reputation of being very ugly, and Jesus that of being very handsome. But the parallel is not about that. What mattered to Van Gogh was not what was given, but what was done with it. Reality alone was not enough. A well-felt work was a work that showed the 'ray from on high'. The objective representation of reality was only photography, sterile and empty.

And so, what Van Gogh admired in realist literature was precisely what did not belong to realism: the man behind the work. In addition, and unlike the Naturalists, he was more sensitive to 'temperament' than to the 'corner of nature'. When nature was well observed, and a skilful artist, lit up by the ray of light from on high, was inspired by it to create a work of art, that artist put his *sentiment* into it. When this *sentiment* is in accord with the essential values of simplicity and authenticity, Van Gogh saw the infinite, 'it'. Rembrandt's portraits were bearers of this ideal, in that they go beyond the framework of depiction and breathe in something which goes beyond the framework of reality itself. Rembrandt's *sentiment* inspired silent admiration in Van Gogh, a meditative contemplation comparable to a moment of grace. Realism was the guarantor of a certain authenticity, and of a rejection of manner, chic, artifice. It was this approach through the negative that seemed to attract Van Gogh. It was this search for *sentiment* that set him on the path to characterization, to exaggeration and simplification, which naturally summoned up the need for the *type*.

So, when he wrote to Van Rappard that he had stopped spending time with the artists in The Hague because he had a bad reputation,¹⁵⁵ he felt more liberated than excluded: this enabled him to concentrate on what was eternally beautiful in nature. In order to show that solitude could be productive and beneficial, he gave the example of Robinson Crusoe and his courage.

All in all, Van Gogh used realism to enable himself to manipulate reality in the service of his own feelings. The use he made of the *type* embodies this idea perfectly:

My aim is to do a drawing that not exactly everyone will understand, the *figure* expressed in its essence in simplified form, with deliberate disregard of those details that aren't part of the true character and are merely accidental. Thus it shouldn't, for example, be the portrait of Pa but rather the *type* of a poor village pastor going to visit a sick person. The same with the couple arm in arm by the beech hedge – the type of a man and woman who have grown old together and in whom love and loyalty have remained, rather than portraits of Pa and Ma, although I hope they'll pose for it. [361]

The very essence of Van Gogh's preoccupations and artistic reflections was thus located on a much broader plane than that of realism, and *a fortiori* of Naturalism. The intellectual confrontation between Michelet and Van Gogh senior led to a similar conclusion:

To me, Pa is someone who didn't have any knowledge of the intimate lives of some great men when he should have had it. I mean that, in my view, Pa does not know, did not know nor ever will know what the soul of modern civilization

is. What is it? The eternal, the *very greatest* simplicity and truth – Dupré, Daubigny, Corot, Millet, Israëls, Herkomer – not to mention Michelet, Hugo, Zola, Balzac, a host more from the more distant and more recent past. If prejudices, which Pa has carried with him throughout his life with an assiduousness worthy of a better cause, stand in his way – to me he's a black ray. The only criticism I have of Pa is: why isn't he a white ray? This is harsh criticism, so be it, I can't help it. To you I say, look for white ray, white, do you hear! [403]

The soul of modern civilization was *eternity and simplicity, the greatest truth*. Flaubert was undoubtedly a representative of this par excellence, a man who advocated great simplicity and a search for the truth released from the conventions or the servility which muzzled authors before him. But to Van Gogh, Balzac, Zola, Michelet and Hugo, whom one may with difficulty classify as four realists, were also representatives of *the modern soul*, because they connected to the 'white ray', the ray of light from on high.

Literary realism is a concept about which there is no unanimity. In any event, to obstruct ourselves with a definition would be simplistic and futile here, since Van Gogh himself respected very few definitions. However, there is general agreement that, for example, *Le père Goriot* by Balzac is a 'realist' novel, as opposed to *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo – because in the latter novel, the concern for plausibility is subordinate to the dramatic action and the colourful situations.

Realist authors practised the innovative working methods of detailed research and observation in the service of their creations, in order to make the fiction they described as plausible as possible, and with as much objectivity as possible. The art of realist authors did not consist only of the beautiful and effective writing of an invented story, but came down to masking the fiction as skilfully as possible by using only plausible elements. For realists, the real was not the literary transcription of an observed reality, but the description of a possible reality. Van Gogh was well aware of the romantic heritage which still weighed heavily upon realist literature, and he explicitly claimed the right to use and appreciate non-realist procedures. He thus defended his *independence* in relation to realism. In this sense, realism and Naturalism were not modern gospels inasmuch as they were collections of doctrinaire texts, sources of absolute truth. They were modern gospels because they permitted the revelation of 'it', the 'something on high', in other words the 'ray from on high', by employing contemporary methods.

If you think this a dangerous tendency towards romanticism, a betrayal of 'realism' – painting from the imagination – having a greater love for the colourist's palette than for nature, well then, so be it.

Delacroix, Millet, Corot, Dupré, Daubigny, Breton, 30 more names, do they not form the heart of this century where art is concerned, and all of them, do

they not have their roots in romanticism, even if they surpassed romanticism? Romance and romanticism are our era, and one must have imagination, sentiment in painting. HAPPILY, realism and naturalism are not free of them. Zola creates, but doesn't hold a mirror up to things, creates them amazingly, but creates, poetizes. That's why it's so good. So much for naturalism and realism, which are NONETHELESS related to romanticism. [537]

Van Gogh did not therefore discern any domain reserved for the absolute at the heart of matters artistic. Quite the contrary; this absolute encompassed several eras and several trends of thought. The way in which Van Gogh tackled these vital questions about his artistic activity was totally original. Not only in the sense that he was the only one to envisage things in this way, but because this thinking was specific to him, individual and independent, and he found the major part of his sources in his own mind and his own sensibility. Thus, he would himself divide his 'ray' into two categories, the origin of which he found in Hugo, the better to explain what he is trying to tell Theo:

In respect of people who genuinely seek good, I think what Hugo says is true, 'there is the BLACK ray and there is the WHITE ray'.

In my view Pa has more the black ray and Corot has more the white ray, but both of them have a ray from on high.

So I don't call anyone whom we've discussed bad, NO, for all that, but I do say that the black ray has a fatal side, and because I've since thought about what you said to me on the station platform when you left, I tell you now in explanation of what I couldn't readily find words for then, 'I know that Pa is Pa, but there's something else besides that, namely what we'll call "the white ray"'. And I find more that's positive, more true peace in that, and I've fixed my attention on it much more. As to Millet, he's the man above all others who had the white ray. Millet has a gospel, and I ask you whether there's a distinction between a drawing by him and a good sermon. It makes the sermon black, it's the outcome of the comparison, even if it (the sermon, that is) is fine in itself, assuming that it is. I know that you too have a lot of strife at the moment, although I don't know precisely the ins and outs of it. And in any event it's out of sympathy that I tell you precisely what I think about a few things, because I've also had and still have a lot of strife.

And I wish you more and more of the white ray, you hear! [388]

Two remarks must be made after reading this passage. Firstly, that Van Gogh was applying thoughts that he derived from his application of art to his own life, as well as to Theo's and his father's: Theo's personal problems ought apparently to be relieved by the thought that his brother wished him plenty of 'white ray'. This

reinforces the idea that for Van Gogh there was no difference between his personal and professional life. Each facet of his profession and his person were constituent parts of a system designed to serve the same goal: blossoming as a socially useful artist with recognized, positive and consolatory work. Secondly, according to Van Gogh, good intentions are not enough. His father was sincerely dedicated to a good cause, but his lack of discernment turned his good actions into so many failed meetings with something greater. As Van Gogh indicated, his father had not had 'any knowledge of the intimate lives of some great men' [403], those men buried beneath theories whose limits Van Gogh denied. He who seeks the man through the work will find at least as many examples in the authors as in their works.

The men behind the works: authoritarians, rebels and fighters

In a letter addressed to Pablo Picasso, Antonin Artaud wrote: 'Books, writings, canvases, art are nothing; a man is recognized by his life, not his work, and what is that if not his cry of life.'¹⁵⁶ Van Gogh would have supported this idea if he had been a contemporary of Artaud, just as he supported what Zola said in *Mes haines*, 'in the painting (the work of art) I seek, I love the man – the artist.'¹⁵⁷ Van Gogh wondered about the thinker, the visionary, the human character behind certain canvases. The men (and one woman) whom Van Gogh admired had common characteristics, which may explain the attraction he felt for them: they were predominantly characterized by a destiny made up of unsubmitiveness, rebellion and the assumption of strong, independent and authoritative positions. Van Gogh was very sensitive to what he called the 'virility' of words: the strength of expression, clarity and simplicity. He went so far as to compare his father to what, according to Proudhon, caused the 'desolation of the righteous man': a woman.¹⁵⁸ Without claiming to be 'righteous', he felt a deep despair when faced with the ideas of his father, who was decidedly not *virile*.

While deposing his father, he found the authors and artists he admired to provide a source of inspiration by example and, especially, a recognition of his own career path, which could only reassure him; real art comes only from self-denial and stubbornness – in the face of general disapproval. Genius, the ray of light from on high, even *needs* to swim against the current in order to express itself fully. So struggle was an integral part of his artistic and intellectual development, following the example of the struggles experienced by those he admired.

But, if one analyzes from close up, one sees that the greatest and most energetic people of the century have always worked *against the grain*, and with them working was always through personal initiative.

Both in painting and in literature (I don't know about music, but I imagine that it will have been the same thing there).

Starting something on a small scale, persevering come what may, producing a great deal with a little capital, having character rather than money, more audacity than credit. Look at Millet and Sensier, look at Balzac, Zola, De Goncourt. Look at Delacroix. [556]

Van Gogh wrote this passage just before joining his brother in Paris. Work, boldness, character in spite of difficulties: that was, according to him, what would help him acquire sufficient fame to enable him to live by his art. He claimed to be a follower of Millet, Zola and Delacroix, eternal opponents and artistic geniuses, faithful to their beliefs against all obstacles: perfect examples used to serve an argument designed to justify his own conduct and his own path.



Beyond their differences, Victor Hugo, Jules Michelet and Emile Zola shared a determination to guide and educate their readers. Their tone was authoritative, sometimes self-important, and the themes they dealt with were at the heart of the debates of their century. Taking the side of the humblest folk (Michelet in *Le peuple*, Hugo in *Les misérables*, Zola in *Germinal*, for example), they were often regarded as veritable 'fathers of the people', guides capable of directing humanity towards a better future, denouncing the misdeeds of a cynical, inhuman society. Van Gogh would doubtless have been in agreement with Stéphane Mallarmé, who wrote in a letter to Zola: 'Those who accuse you of not having written for the common people are wrong, in a way, just as much as those who long for a former ideal; you have found a modern one, that's all ...'¹⁵⁹

Hugo, Michelet and Zola played political roles and committed themselves in the service of their ideas, through a taste for liberty and justice; they were the target of numerous attacks and criticisms, and in their turn uttered reservations, objections and counter-propositions directed at those in power. In a way, Van Gogh turned these legendary rebels into substitute fathers, or at any rate, the painter regarded these authors as supports, *in the horticultural sense* of the word: they supported him during his growth so that he could concentrate on producing beautiful fruit, enabling him not to waste his energy constructing his own justifications for his existence. He assimilated their art, their thinking and their example, which he transformed whenever he needed to, in order to serve his own ends.

At the time of the Kee Vos affair, it was Michelet who served to parry outside attacks. But the reproaches rained down too when Van Gogh set up home with the prostitute Sien Hoornik in The Hague. This time Van Gogh added the Bible and

Zola to Michelet in order to ensure his defence: he compared himself to Mme François, a character in *Le ventre de Paris* who brings aid to a man who has fainted in the middle of the road, to the jeers of other carnival folk, who *reproach* her for her compassion.¹⁶⁰ The love of her fellow man, which induced Mme François to help Etienne, is the same love that caused Van Gogh to rescue Sien. For him, this was the 'salt of life', which recalls Matthew 5: 13, 'Ye are the salt of the earth.' This is, basically, what gave a meaning to his existence. He wanted to make a place for himself as an artist, but did not want to achieve this unless he could remain perfectly faithful to the idea that he had of what was good, that 'eternal beauty'.

His argument was constantly mingled with secular and religious, Naturalist and romantic references, which had nothing in common except that they were the work of 'great artists'. At least two conditions seem to have been necessary to enter Van Gogh's pantheon before 1886: one had to be an artist and to have had a life in which one had demonstrated one's strength of character.

Michelet combines these two qualities: he was the model of the hard-working, disciplined and stubborn writer, who, comfortably ensconced in the international renown he had won through his contributions to history, could allow himself to declare a thousand truths in a loud, confident voice, far beyond the limits of the subject that had brought him his glory, despite difficult conditions and numerous enemies. Similarly, it is almost impossible to have had a more turbulent destiny as regards political and intellectual commitment than that of Victor Hugo. At the same time, it would be difficult to use a more confident tone than the one that characterized the work of the author of *Légende des siècles*; Hugo's overbearing style provoked as many storms as his actual opinions. Accustomed to glorious feats, changing ideas but remaining faithful to his obstinacy, Hugo was one of those 'great men' who would show Van Gogh that intransigence could lead to great glory and an exceptional destiny. Nevertheless, the painter confined himself to admiring Hugo's style, sense of emphasis and exaggeration. He practically never quoted him in order to back up his ideas or his theories. Van Gogh remained quite impermeable to Hugo's ideas, in so far as they are definable; he saw them above all as representative of an era he had not experienced, marked by revolutions and by the apogee of romanticism, with which he maintained a nostalgic rapport. Lastly, Zola was constantly at the centre of numerous polemics, notably on the subject of acceptable behaviour. Nietzsche, writing about Zola, spoke of 'the joy of stinking', which undoubtedly speaks volumes. Van Gogh admired this hard-working man of integrity, faithful to his ideas to the point of devotion, a powerful poet and brilliant pamphleteer, who had no hesitation in rubbing shoulders with society's vilest elements in order to create the most beautiful and the darkest pages of his work, without complacency, without condescension, and often without judgement.

By using these three authors as shields, Van Gogh could respond to every attack, whether it was intellectual, literary or political. Michelet was a republican, Hugo was a little of everything according to the circumstances, and Zola seemed to raise himself above politics, whilst leaning towards socialism. These three individuals combined offered an extremely broad range of possibilities for identification, as much through the content of their works as through the example they showed of intransigence towards whatever they considered contrary to the desirable forward march of human society. It is without doubt in this intransigence that Van Gogh recognized himself the most.



Three other authors, this time English, less paternal and authoritative but just as intransigent, displayed examples of rebelliousness which had an impact on Van Gogh: George Eliot, Charles Dickens and John Bunyan. The young man knew the biography of Dickens by Forster,¹⁶¹ would have found it difficult not to know about the life of Bunyan, and read absolutely everything that could provide him with information about the lives of his favourite authors, such as Eliot, in the numerous periodicals he read – although it has to be pointed out that when he read his first Eliot novels, he knew nothing about the author, whom he took to be a man. Bunyan, Dickens and Eliot shared the fact that they had to fight against a hostile environment, and that they allowed their pens to guide their lives despite family reticence or other difficult circumstances.

George Eliot, whose real name was Mary Ann Cross, had to shake off a very rigorous and suffocatingly religious upbringing. Her career path is in some ways comparable to that of Van Gogh. Eliot left school at the age of sixteen. Her continued intellectual development was ensured by her father and by herself. She studied Latin, Greek, German and Italian. Her destiny was marked by a remarkable capacity for work, and by great intransigence. Thus, from the moment when she converted to a sort of rational atheism, it was without concessions, despite a profound family crisis. As within the Van Gogh household, the incomprehension between child and father was total and insurmountable. But Eliot remained faithful to her convictions and eventually became one of the most influential English writers of the nineteenth century.

Charles Dickens achieved the tour de force of establishing a very critical vision of Victorian England while at the same time being applauded by it. Alain said of him: 'To my eyes he is the only one who, instead of offering me ideas that he has made up, offers me my own and marks them with chaos and creativity.'¹⁶² Dickens had a miserable childhood, during which he was sent out to work, and which was overshadowed by an absent father and a weak-minded mother. Commentators on

the novelist agree that Dickens's work relies upon a feeling of rebellion towards everything that represents authority. As a defender of the humblest folk and poet of poverty, Van Gogh could not fail to see this man's destiny as a precious example, a path to follow, an ideal of obstinacy, will and struggle.

The life of John Bunyan was equally dominated by struggle. Without having had a real school education, this career soldier found himself at nineteen in the grip of a veritable mystical crisis which led to a vocation. Becoming a Baptist preacher, he was arrested during the English Civil War and spent twelve years in prison, where he wrote *The pilgrim's progress*. His life was marked by doubts, heart-break, and, above all, a total lack of worldly ambition. Bunyan never wanted to create literature. On account of his lack of education, Bunyan had no idea of what literature was ... Self-denial, his humble origins, his passion and the late revelation of Bunyan's talent must have influenced Van Gogh's taste for this author. He seemingly read *The pilgrim's progress* in England, when his own vocation took shape. His identification with Bunyan therefore becomes, if not obvious, then at least probable.



Finally, the literature devoted to two painters, Delacroix and Millet, showed Van Gogh examples of intransigence, courage, struggle and renewal. The importance of these two painters was colossal for Vincent, and their influence extended well beyond what we shall deal with here. However, at the level of literature, there are essentially two authors who made an impression upon the Dutchman: Théophile Silvestre, with his *Eugène Delacroix, documents nouveaux*, and Sensier, with *La vie et l'oeuvre de Jean-François Millet*. Van Gogh's correspondence does not show any attachment to other texts regarding them.



In 1825, Eugène Delacroix was in London, where he was able to improve his knowledge of Shakespeare, Byron, Walter Scott and Goethe's *Faust*. In painting, he became acquainted with Bonington and Gainsborough, as well as the landscapes of John Constable. Van Gogh, who had also lived in England, also admired Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Bonington and Constable. There is nothing exceptional about this, since these artists were among the best known in English romanticism. So we cannot talk about an extraordinary similarity of taste between Van Gogh and Delacroix. However, in view of Van Gogh's interest in the French revolutionary movements of 1789 and 1830, it seems obvious that Delacroix's subject-matter

and obsessions, as well as his technique, exercised an important attraction on the Dutchman.

For example, in *Liberty leading the people*, Delacroix is depicted standing on the barricades, with a rifle in his hand.¹⁶³ This symbolic, idealized depiction shows an artist who was politically committed to the extent that he was willing to face the bullets of those who resisted social progress. Van Gogh would never have a very pronounced interest in political matters, but he was a fervent admirer of the people's struggles and of rebellions of all sorts. Michelet had depicted the revolution of 1789 through intellectual work; Delacroix depicted the 1830 revolution through art.

It was apparently in 1885 that Van Gogh read Silvestre's *Delacroix*. As usual, the painter quoted a long passage from it practically by heart, this time in a letter to his friend Van Rappard. It is unlikely that he copied out the passage, since, as he often did, he made several mistakes in reproducing the text:

Have you heard much about Eugène Delacroix? I've read a splendid article about him by Silvestre. To write for you a few words from it that occur to me right now – the end of the article went like this: thus died, almost smiling, Eugène Delacroix – a painter of high breeding – who had a sun in his head and a thunderstorm in his heart – who – from warriors went to saints – from saints to lovers – from lovers to tigers – and from tigers to flowers. [526]

Silvestre gave the exact date of death and the painter's full name in his original text, and Van Gogh considerably distorted the end, which read: 'who for forty years played the whole gamut of human passions, and whose superb, ferocious or gentle, brushwork moved from saints to warriors, from warriors to lovers, from lovers to tigers, and from tigers to flowers.'¹⁶⁴ This is a very fine illustration of the selection process to which Van Gogh treated his literary sources. He forgot what seemed unimportant to him, the date and the registry office details; he made mistakes in reproducing Silvestre's list; and he completely ignored the cyclical effect the author wished to produce. Vincent retained only what seemed vital to him: the 'sun in the head and a thunderstorm in the heart',¹⁶⁵ symbolizing the compulsive need to paint, the rightness and justice of what was painted, and Delacroix's revolutionary character. Still more important: Delacroix died 'almost smiling'. This smile, which, on the threshold of the afterlife, displayed final satisfaction, symbolized the fact that he had triumphed in a life of suffering and struggle. Van Gogh himself believed in a 'final victory'; he constantly told Theo that he firmly believed in the future. Delacroix's smile was to remain a glimmer of light for Van Gogh, a lighthouse on the horizon of his existence, which he would attain through a life of work, humility and resignation ... whose principal driving force would be the refusal to follow anything he did not believe in, as far as possible remaining independent of the influence of men and events.

A close reading of *Documents nouveaux* reveals a number of other factors which may have inspired Van Gogh. For example, in a passage entitled 'On Beauty', the following appears:

Is the sense of Beauty the impression that is produced in us by a painting by Velázquez, an engraving by Rembrandt, a scene by Shakespeare? Or is Beauty revealed to us by the sight of straight noses, correct draperies by Girodet, Gérard and other pupils of David? The Silenus is beautiful, the Faun is beautiful. The head of Socrates in the antique style is full of character with a flat nose, a thick-lipped mouth and small eyes.¹⁶⁶

Like Delacroix, Van Gogh used the example of Socrates' ugliness, when he described his portrait of Roulin the postman in a letter to his sister Wil:

I'm now working on the portrait of a postman with his dark blue uniform with yellow.

A head something like that of Socrates, almost no nose, a high forehead, bald pate, small grey eyes, high-coloured full cheeks, a big beard, pepper and salt, big ears. The man is a fervent republican and socialist, reasons very well and knows many things. [653]

But Socrates was not just a man with an unappealing physique. He was also a man whose death, like that of Delacroix, was accompanied by a 'final victory'. Van Gogh developed this idea with incredible lucidity in a letter to Theo composed in July 1883 in The Hague. Prior to this passage, a part of which has already been quoted, Vincent declared that his conscience was 'the very highest form of reason – the reason within the reason'; that consequently he must follow his reason, since he has an 'unlimited confidence' in art.

Whoever bravely tries to follow reason and above all conscience, the very highest reason, the sublime reason, and tries to put being honest into practice, is unlikely to go completely astray, I believe, although one won't succeed without mistakes and banging one's head and weaknesses, and won't achieve perfection. And this will give rise to a deep sense of compassion and courtesy, I believe, broader than that measured quality that the ministers have made their speciality.

So one may not be regarded as of any significance by either one side or the other, and be accounted one of the mediocrities, and feel oneself at heart to be nothing other than an ordinary person among ordinary people, yet despite all that one will arrive at a relatively fixed serenity in the end.

One will be able to raise one's conscience to a level of development such that it will become the voice of a better and higher I that is the master of the ordinary I. And one won't relapse into scepticism or cynicism, not become one of the vile mockers.

Not at once. Michelet puts it beautifully, and those few words by M. say everything I mean, 'Socrates was born a real satyr, but through devotion, work, renunciation of frivolous things, he changed himself so completely that on his last day, before his judges and facing death, there was in him something of a god, a ray from on high, with which the Parthenon was illuminated.' Well, one sees the same thing in Jesus too, who began as an ordinary labourer and worked his way up to be something else, whatever it may have been, a personality so full of compassion, love, goodness, seriousness, that one is still drawn to it. [368]

Van Gogh truncated the quotation from Michelet, which again leads us to assume that he did not copy out this passage from *L'amour*, but that he wrote it down from memory. His principal mistake was to write 'Parthénon' where Michelet had 'Phédon'. More important than this confusion is the fact that in this passage, Van Gogh stated that the 'very highest reason, the sublime reason', that is to say his *conscience*, would cause him to feel greater compassion, although this would not be recognized by others. His conscience, the ultimate value in the sense that it was the highest thing attainable, was a very strong declaration of emancipation. Intransigence for Van Gogh was *necessary* for anyone who wanted to surpass himself, and *inevitable* for anyone who followed his conscience. Socrates' end as seen by Michelet and Delacroix's end as described by Silvestre both contain this same ultimate sense of satisfaction, the final victory of the 'ray from on high': the divine element in man, tamed, assumed, appeased. It was this final victory to which Van Gogh aspired.

The questions Delacroix asked are those that Vincent asked constantly – and they are also the ones that the nineteenth century asked as a whole. Delacroix and Van Gogh had both joined the same side: that of rejecting soulless technical virtuosity, reduced to producing nothing but academies of unreal models. Vincent admired Delacroix as a rebel, for his rejection of absurd conventions and his humanity. But *Documents nouveaux* contains many other elements whose echo can be found in the work, the correspondence and the life of Van Gogh. For example, Delacroix and Van Gogh shared the same belief that 'human passions' could be translated, strengthened or attenuated by colour: 'External nature, reflected or rather transfigured by the imagination, shines out or is darkened in [...] [Delacroix's] landscapes; in them, light and colour are joined with or opposed to the character of human passions.'¹⁶⁷ This passage is reminiscent of the description Van Gogh gave, in Arles, of his *Night café* (F 463 JH 1575): 'Now as for recovering the money

paid to the landlord through my painting, I'm not making a point of it, because the painting is one of the ugliest I've done. It's the equivalent, though different, of the potato eaters. 'I've tried to express the terrible human passions with the red and the green.' [676]¹⁶⁸

Next, Van Gogh was convinced, like Delacroix, that painting was a profession in which one had to risk one's health. Thus, Silvestre has Delacroix say: 'Let us raise up our fame on the ruins of our own bodies!' Further on, he emphasizes that 'Delacroix's health was frail and capricious; cold, heat, dryness, damp, all had an astonishing impact upon his talent and his personality. What upset him the most was the need to interrupt his works in progress. He cared for his health as a warrior grooms his horse.'¹⁶⁹

Last and perhaps most important, the *Documents nouveaux* enabled Van Gogh to recognize Delacroix as a paradoxical man with a low profile, who sought to perfect his technique with the aid of complex, elaborate and rigorous systems, at the same time refusing to turn these systems into principles:

With his subtlety, his perseverance, and despite the continual study of nature and the masters, Delacroix had remained for longer than we think without absolute principles, compensating for knowledge as best he could with sentiment. In the flower of his maturity, he still said: 'Every day I see that I do not know my trade.' There was no affectation in this admission: he really felt that his initial education as a painter was inadequate, even bad.¹⁷⁰

The man who smiles as he dies can experience ultimate satisfaction because he feels that he has accomplished his duty. This is a human absolute, an artist's dream: to leave the world happy in the knowledge that one could not have done better, to leave with a *clear conscience*. This is basically the secular counterpart of the man who has lived 'in the fear of God', and who knows at the moment of death that his salvation is assured. The example of Delacroix, confident in death, can only have strengthened Van Gogh in his belief that he must never stop driving himself forward. The painter must remain dynamic, sacrifice his body, call himself into question constantly. Somehow he must recreate his life at each moment, refusing to be content with what he seemed to have attained: this was the price of his salvation, the condition necessary for the final victory.

This preoccupation accorded well with Van Gogh's natural inclinations; he was never able to rein in his enthusiasms in society. The testimonies of his siblings, his parents and all those who met him are consistent on one point: Vincent had an impossible personality. He was unrestrained, bold, energetic, brutal and prone to anger. On this point, he may have been reassured as he read in Silvestre's work: 'Extremely circumspect towards the people he most respected, he was exceptionally open and vivacious with those who understood and loved

him. A little politics was moreover very forgiveable in a man who had been placed on a continual alert by forty years of struggle, maintained by himself alone against his entire century, and from which he eventually emerged victorious. His beliefs were as natural to him as the circulation of the blood and breathing; but he did not like expressing them and would only explain them in an intimate conversation.’¹⁷¹

Finally, Van Gogh always believed in the historical dynamism of art. He sensed that he was just one link in the chain, as others before him had been. Here again, Silvestre’s work shows him the way: ‘Instead of exhausting himself vainly proving the pros and cons of aesthetics, he painted as his heart told him to. In our days, as in the future, he can only be glorified by bold, vivacious natures, joined to him by fate in a sort of intellectual consanguinity.’¹⁷²

Van Gogh cannot have been too upset by the thought of being a blood-brother of Delacroix. He too let his heart take precedence over technique, and his passion over theory.



Millet was one of the few great men to whom Van Gogh gave the title ‘father’. The following extract shows that this title had significance for the painter of *The potato eaters*. He had already used Michelet as an *intellectual* substitute father; in the case of Millet, he was a substitute for an *artistic* father.

I don’t differ with Pa when I consider Pa in himself, but I do differ with Pa when I compare Pa with the great père Millet, say.

His doctrine is so great that Pa’s way of looking at things seems extremely petty beside it. You will think this terrible of me – I can do nothing about it – it’s my conviction, deep inside me, and I stick up for it because you confuse Pa’s character with Corot’s, for instance.

How do I see Pa? As a person of similar character to Corot’s father, but Pa has nothing of Corot himself.

Corot did love his father, BUT HE DIDN’T FOLLOW HIM. I love Pa, too, so long as my path isn’t made too difficult by a difference of opinion. I do not love Pa at a moment when a certain petty-minded pride stands in the way of the generous and conclusive achievement of a complete, definitive and so desirable reconciliation. [414]¹⁷³

In an act of emancipation and affirmation, Vincent used Millet and Corot to show that he did not have to respect someone just because social convention dictated that he should. Van Gogh was naturally allergic to polite customs: his

over-energetic, over-honest mind saw them as merely an excuse for pettiness. In the same letter, he described himself as a dog, impulsive and prone to barking, but nonetheless innocent: he was unable to escape his condition, his nature as a dog. He declared that he would be a painter and that he would be poor, because he would not be understood. Similarly, Sensier wrote: 'Millet, a peasant, would always remain poor like a peasant.'¹⁷⁴ Van Gogh understood very early on that he did not represent the majority, but that he had a chance of representing great men. From that point on, his objective as an artist was set at a level that he believed he could only attain through considerable efforts and enormous sacrifices. His father's criticisms, dictated by the conventions that imprisoned him in an *inferior* system, which Vincent categorically rejected, were then nothing more than obstacles *necessary* to an existence dedicated to surpassing oneself. His father's immobility was an integral part of Van Gogh's identity; it was a fundamental element in his artistic edifice. Against the tide, Vincent launched himself into a *creative* enterprise because he was not content with what *is*, the world which was attempting to impose itself upon him. In the passage quoted above, he declared that his father was suffering from 'petty-minded pride', in contrast to père Millet's doctrine, which was 'so great'. The artist demanded the freedom to love without following blindly, and he demanded that this love should be returned. In reality, if he could not be understood by his father, he felt he had the right to his respect; but all he would receive was benevolent incomprehension.

Van Gogh's reading, in which the example of Jesus of Nazareth played a fundamental role, had shown him that it was perfectly justifiable to want to overturn the established order. As an artist, Van Gogh even regarded the overthrow of the established order as a duty. But although he was perfectly capable of pointing to his father's *intellectual* failings, he was blind to his father's unbelievable openness, incredible tolerance, and great *affection*. After all, the pastor several times welcomed his adult son back under his roof, feeding him and providing for his upkeep. But Van Gogh neither saw nor appreciated how deeply his parents must have dug in order to find the patience to endure their eldest child's escapades.

So it was only natural that Van Gogh, who used authority without submitting to it, would find himself an unchallengeable intellectual framework capable of justifying his actions and his opinions. From this perspective, his reading of the life of Millet as described by Sensier was a revelation. Once again, he *encountered* a kindred spirit, with whom he shared a large number of points of view. Once again, he found reasons to believe that he was, despite or because of his impossible personality, on the right path. His father's 'petty-mindedness' only strengthened his convictions.

According to Sensier, Millet was a great reader, and had almost entirely educated himself through reading:

He read everything – from the *Almanach boiteux* of Strasbourg to Paul de Kock, from Homer to Béranger; he also read with delight Shakspeare, Sir Walter Scott, Byron, Cooper, Goethe's 'Faust' and German ballads. Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand had especially impressed him [...] The contents of the libraries of Cherbourg were all passed in review, and when he got to Paris he was already a cultivated man, familiar with letters [...] He knew a clerk of a library in Cherbourg, who got him books [...] This is how François Millet obtained his education, with no other teacher than the things that attracted him, with no other guide than his natural logic.¹⁷⁵

Here again, Millet's independence of mind provided Van Gogh with an example to reassure him about his own difficulties in coping with authority. Young Millet's literary tastes have many points in common with Van Gogh's: Shakespeare and Hugo as the dominant figures, along with less obvious reading matter: Bossuet, Fénelon, and the Bible. In his own words as reported by Sensier, Millet had 'a passion for reading the whole time', just as Van Gogh spoke of his 'more or less irresistible passion for books'. Millet was, like Vincent, a great letter-writer, who wrote to Sensier, his patron and confidant, to report on his progress, his victories, his difficulties and his needs. Sensier's biography hinges on extracts from his correspondence with Millet, which provided Van Gogh with a *precedent* he had dreamed of. The analogy with his and Theo's situation promised a 'final victory', ultimate satisfaction, which could only strengthen his choice of career and his obstinacy regarding his artistic production, driving him to paint what others rejected, and to explore new, original and bold paths.

Like Delacroix, Millet was able to preserve his identity and advance along the path of his aspirations in a society that was at first sight resistant and hostile to change: he was admitted to the Salon and won medals there. Then he refused honours so as not to betray his beliefs. He returned to the countryside and remained, as genuinely as possible, the painter of peasants in the region of his birth.

In his preface to Sensier's biography of Millet, Paul Mantz wrote:

Millet looked for beauty in the expression, and expression in the typical figure of the workman in the fields. He knew as well as any one where to find the beauty of Apollo, the regularity, delicacy, and distinction of civilized races. He was not ignorant of rules of selection; he had read the grammar of plastic art. He had seen, as well as others, the 'handsome fellow' of his own village and the pretty girls of the country, but he sought to characterize, with the whole force of his mind and all the memories of his heart, the painful and inexplicable condition of the human creature upon earth.

[...] The peasant is to him a living being who formulates, more strongly and clearly than any other man, the image, the symbolical figure of humanity. [...]

Seeing the rustic family occupied in the works of the fields with anxious mind, resigned attitude, and slow and painful gesture, we will come back to Millet, and he that understands him will say: Here is a painter who has given a place to the humblest; a poet who has raised to honor those whom the world ignores, and a good man whose work encourages and consoles.¹⁷⁶

These few sentences were very rich in foundation stones for Van Gogh. He too was preoccupied with doing justice to the beauty of the workman in the fields, whose 'typical figure' he also looked for. He too had read the 'grammar of plastic art', but he preferred the expression of 'the painful and inexplicable condition of the human creature upon earth' to the painting of 'handsome fellows'. Finally, according to Mantz, Millet succeeded in consoling his neighbour by 'raising to honor those whom the world ignores' – which perfectly matched the idea Van Gogh had of art as consolation.

These generous words were addressed only to the person viewing the picture, and not to the workers themselves. Millet and Van Gogh had a contemplative fascination with poverty and work, devoid of bias. Neither wished to improve the fate of the peasants they painted and drew. They found them beautiful, even in their poverty. The only injustice they denounced was general indifference, on an aesthetic level, to the *beauty* of humble folk. On a *moral* level, the arguments of both Van Gogh and Millet were absolutely neutral. They did not denounce the system that condemned so many people to a precarious, unpleasant life. The question of social justice did not arise for these artists who, almost complacently, painted a portrait of blatant injustices. Beauty was not moral for Van Gogh. It either existed or it did not, and it would be wrong not to look for it in 'common', even 'vulgar', subjects when it was to be found there in profusion. Elevation was achieved by accepting poverty, not by rejecting it. Ugliness, on the other hand, had infiltrated the comfortable levels of society, the self-satisfied, stupid, greedy, artificial petit-bourgeoisie, as Zola showed in a masterly way in *Pot-bouille*, and Daumier demonstrated with his *Gens de justice*.

Van Gogh's view of Jesus as an artist, expressed in his last letter to Emile Bernard,¹⁷⁷ only takes on its full meaning if we place it in this context: Jesus is an artist, the greatest of all artists, because he was able to *transform people*. In other words, he opened the eyes of those who followed him and showed them the *beauty* of their situation, which was worthy and full of potential. By offering them this perspective, he comforted them. According to Van Gogh, it was Jesus' words which were able to transform people. Jesus is the greatest of artists because he displays a perfect balance between altruistic, morally beautiful actions, and artistic means: his stylistic figures, his parables. For Van Gogh, consolation was an aesthetic emotion which arises when an individual recognizes the infinity that surrounds him, in or through a work of art; this absolute, this 'it', made visible by the artist,

is offered to the viewer, enters the world of the possible: when this transfer of emotion occurs, Van Gogh talks about *feeling*, the gauge by which the success of a work of art is judged. By pruning, disentangling and amplifying reality, the artist depicts a reality which is accessible, idealized. Jesus is the archetype of the consolatory artist, because he was able to marry form and content. Both were firmly anchored in reality and therefore recognizable, ensuring that the emotion being felt was transmitted most effectively; in short, the form and content of Jesus's doctrine are one. Consequently, it is completely futile for anyone who wants to create a consolatory, truly 'felt' work of art to employ one without the other. Millet was a modern representative of this way of seeing art.

Now, in order for there to be recognition there must be plausibility. This is why Van Gogh criticized the young Bernard for creating 'abstract' depictions of scenes inspired by the New Testament:

Because I adore the true, the possible; if I were capable of spiritual fervour, I would bow before that study, so powerful that it makes you tremble, by père



12. Jean-François Millet, *Peasants bringing home a calf born in the fields*, 1864, The Art Institute of Chicago, Henry Field Memorial Collection

Millet – peasants carrying to the farmhouse a calf born in the fields [ill. 12]. Now, my friend – people have felt that from France to America. After that, would you go back to renewing medieval tapestries for us? Truly, is this a sincere conviction? No, you can do better than that, and you know that one has to look for the possible, the logical, the true, even if to some extent you had to forget Parisian things à la Baudelaire. How I prefer Daumier to that gentleman! [822]

If Van Gogh was capable of spiritual fervour, then it would occur when he adored what was real, possible and logical. This phrase alone, addressed to a young artist with the intention of steering him onto the right path, is sufficient to challenge the works of Verkade, Erickson and Kōdera: as the mature artist plays the role of teacher for the space of one letter, he doubts if he is capable of a spiritual impulse. Van Gogh has faith only in the beauty he sees around him, which, as an artist, he can bring to the fore. In order to do this, he does not rely upon ‘correspondences’, or ‘symbolism’, but simply the exaggeration of what *is* and what *may be*. Thus he sees Daumier, the caricaturist, as a much greater artist than Baudelaire – whose subtleties totally escaped him. According to Van Gogh, Baudelaire does not convey anything ‘felt’ or shared, because he has no clear references to reality. Without these references, a work cannot be consolatory, simple and honest. Consequently, Bernard would be extremely wrong to devote himself to paintings which represent only his own vision, which is unique and cannot be shared.

The example Van Gogh used to show Emile Bernard that there were better things to paint than the life of Jesus was a rustic scene by Millet: plausible, real and logical. This was a scene which, according to Vincent, ‘people have felt’. These words must be seen in relation to the notion of feeling which crops up again and again in the correspondence, and which Van Gogh defines clearly when he says he wants to ‘feel the man through the work’. The *sentiment* which the painter evokes is precisely that: the emotional charge conveyed by a work of art, aroused by an artist and perceived by a spectator. This emotional charge, according to Mantz, was at the centre of Millet’s life and work: ‘Millet, however, is neither a discouraged nor a sad man. He is a laborer who loves his field – plows, sows, and reaps it. His field is art. His inspiration is life, is nature – which he loved with all his strength. Let none seek to find in him anything but a pious and compassionate soul, who admires, who speaks from his heart.’¹⁷⁸

Millet himself confirmed this view, when he declared that ‘art is not a pleasure-trip; it is a fight – a mill that grinds. I am not a philosopher, I don’t want to stop pain, or find a formula that will make me indifferent or a stoic. Pain is, perhaps, that which makes the artist express himself most distinctly.’¹⁷⁹ The expression of emotion in a work of art is an attempt to pass on this emotion. Consequently, the artist must feel what he is expressing. So Millet and Van Gogh believed that it was

vital to live 'in the nature' of what they were painting. This idea was followed up in Arles, when Van Gogh talked about 'these Japanese [...], who are so simple and live in nature as if they themselves were flowers.' [686] For this reason, Millet believed it was vital to live in the countryside, and Van Gogh believed it was essential to wear a workman's clothes. Millet 'had taken a little peasant's house with three narrow, low rooms, which served as studio, kitchen, and bed-room for his wife and his three children.'¹⁸⁰ Millet would later enlarge his house and have six other children. To Van Gogh, this existence must have seemed ideal, since it placed Millet in a position to convey his observations and emotions in a genuine, 'real' way. Sensier says of this way of life: 'It is the life of a man of the fields in its most expressive form. In it, we should seek neither a plea nor a satire; but only the serene thoughts of a man happy to be able to express the splendours and the miseries of his companions.'¹⁸¹

The concern to be close to the subject, to become an integral part of it, and the lack of influence from any particular moral code or social ideology did not prevent reality being consciously altered in its depiction. Millet and Van Gogh were both searching for the *type*. According to Sensier, Millet 'makes real nature with what is not pure reality'. 'He uses reality, but he transforms it.'¹⁸² Millet would write more explicitly, in a letter, that 'the type ... is, in my opinion, the greatest truth.'¹⁸³

All the same, Millet refused to idealize: 'In pursuing character he had on the road met ugliness. I mean that, hostile on principle to commonplace idealizations, he was not afraid to put into his rustic compositions figures of rough aspect and coarse individuality, with expressions which seemed to admit that the human is not always vastly superior to the animal. It is this [...] tendency [...] which even Thoré mentioned in the "*Peasants Bringing Home a Calf*."¹⁸⁴ This is this same painting that Van Gogh used as an example to show Bernard what was 'felt', 'real', 'logical' and 'possible'.

When Sensier referred back to Fromentin at the end of his work, we are able to understand just how important the analogies are between this apologia and Van Gogh's ideas:

It seems to us that Millet brought into the school a new element, a manner which by condensing form generalizes and aggrandizes it.

It would be a mistake to reproach him with having suppressed details and taken away accidentals; he was seeking the essential, and he found it. Millet had his ideal, and even if he did not always succeed in reaching it, it will always be to his honor that he strove with indomitable energy to be faithful to truth while escaping the littleness of prose.¹⁸⁵

In this passage, as in numerous other passages from *La vie et l'œuvre de Jean-François Millet*, we could replace the name of Millet with that of Van Gogh, without

betraying either man. The most striking thing is the similar rapport which both painters maintained with reality, truth, and the expression of the *type*. It is obvious that Millet greatly influenced Van Gogh. But we should add the reservation that Vincent primarily recognized himself in Millet as he was *described* (and inevitably idealized) by Sensier, Mantz, Fromentin and Thoré. So it was a romanticized biography that largely determined Van Gogh's view of Millet, just as it was through Michelet's romanticized work that Van Gogh discovered the 1789 revolution. Van Gogh's intellectual, spiritual and artistic landscape was conditioned by literature – as he chose to read it.

6

The Hague: Realism and reality

When he arrived in The Hague, in 1881, Van Gogh's attitude to his artistic and intellectual teachers showed a real determination to learn and a genuine thirst for knowledge. His principal concern was to develop his talents rapidly and effectively. Well aware that this late change of career looked like a senseless adventure, he was forced to defend his career plan by adopting an intellectual position that would justify his choices and actions, following a set pattern: he used Theo as the confidant for his innermost thoughts, told him of his intentions, played upon his naivety and relied upon his own knowledge of literature, apparently not always aware that there might be a difference between fiction, even realist fiction, and reality. Theo, a generous and patient soul, exhibited never-failing admiration and affection for Vincent as he developed as an artist, despite the reservations of their parents, uncles and the incredulous Tersteeg, who were all impervious to any original thinking, and incapable of imagining even for a moment that Vincent's plans might lead to anything other than lamentable failure. So Theo acted as an intermediary between Vincent and his family, and constantly had to attempt to put out fires on one side or another, when the inevitable conflicts arose.

Van Gogh lived in The Hague between December 1881 and September 1883; he was twenty-seven when he arrived and thirty when he left. By then he was a man fortified with a strong intellectual, artistic and spiritual independence, who had a well-defined plan, and who knew where he was going. He had a fondness for pragmatic thinkers, such as Carlyle, Michelet and Beecher Stowe, in whose work he found clear indications applicable to the reality of his own situation. Van Gogh systematically used his reading matter to test reality. The realism of Dickens, Balzac and Erckmann-Chatrian, with which he was familiar before he came to The Hague, became a mirror, which he placed alongside his own life. At the same time, his writing became more forceful, more sure of itself, and moved

further and further away from a conventional style, becoming ever more personal. Vincent adopted a form of expression which was devoid of all restraint. He believed that it was better to express all of his thoughts than to apply any kind of filter, which would result in a 'sort of business style' [199], measured and insignificant. He quickly discovered the works of Zola, which he devoured. He had no idea what 'Naturalism' might be, the movement to which the French novelist claimed to belong, but he was determined to find out.

A stranger on the earth

In the years 1870-80, The Hague was the city of the Dutch artistic avant-garde.¹⁸⁶ Here, Van Gogh believed he could take advantage of the stimulating climate of openness and exchange. He believed firmly in cooperation between artists and hoped to be able to benefit from spending time with the painters of the Hague School. Moreover, the proximity of his cousin by marriage, the painter Anton Mauve, as well as the distance he had placed between himself and his parents, put him in a situation which – not without reason - he considered favourable to his development as an artist. His social, intellectual and family environment was now the one he chose and no longer the one he was forced to put up with.

He set up home in a studio which he furnished like a workman's house, also putting on workmen's clothes when he painted. Visiting other studios and painters in The Hague did not bring him much satisfaction either on a human or an artistic level. It is a safe bet that his brusque manner, his demands and his intransigence prevented him integrating with his peers. In any event, there is no indication that they took him seriously, with one or two exceptions. But if The Hague did not involve him in the rivalry he dreamed of, he did have a chance to become acquainted with many urban themes and subjects, material that he had not previously had the opportunity to draw.

In the early days, he was under the artistic tutelage of Mauve, of whom he said on his arrival in The Hague:

As far as Mauve is concerned – yes of course I'm very fond of M., and sympathize with him, I like his work very much – and I consider myself fortunate to learn something from him, but I can't shut myself up in a system or school any more than Mauve himself can, and in addition to Mauve and Mauve's work, I also like others who are very different and work very differently. [199]

Consequently, Vincent seems to have been determined to keep his eyes wide open; without overdoing his eclecticism, he avoided imposing limits on himself as regards the engravings he collected, the paintings he looked at or the books he read.

Nevertheless, during the first months of his stay in The Hague, he seems to have read very little; in any event, his intense preoccupations with relationships, feelings and his profession left practically no room for comments on what he had read. First, he devoted himself essentially to drawing and to setting up his studio. Next, he was absorbed by his relationship with the prostitute Clasina Hoornik (Sien), whom he housed, fed and used as a model. This 'scandalous' relationship, which would contribute to his falling out with Mauve and Tersteeg, had the effect of further isolating the novice painter, who had few enough visitors already. It was not until he found himself in the hospital following a venereal infection, in June 1882 – that is to say, more than six months after his arrival in The Hague – that he seems to have begun reading again in a more systematic way. Confined to bed, he had the time and doubtless the need to read once more. He declared that he had taken several books on artistic perspective into the hospital with him, as well as a few 'volumes of Dickens' including *The mystery of Edwin Drood*, an unfinished work which – atypically – comes close to being a crime novel. Van Gogh remarked on this occasion that 'there is perspective in Dickens too' [238], a statement that confirms that often Van Gogh did not so much read books as look at them. His ability to visualize the scenes described was remarkably 'plastic', as was shown by his previous fascination with the 'pensive woman' whose description he 'saw' in Michelet.¹⁸⁷

Based on this, Sund writes that Vincent's way of seeing was conditioned by 'word painting': 'His artistic aspirations and his Christianity turned liberalist zeal made him especially receptive to writers who put pictorialist prose at the service of social commitment, and these paired interests made Van Gogh a ripe target for Zola's Naturalism – a movement he would explore and embrace in 1882, when his pursuit of his art led him to The Hague.'¹⁸⁸

This statement appears perfectly logical, but it misses out several steps and gives a false image of Van Gogh's path to intellectual maturity. First of all, we should ask whether there has ever been non-pictorial – or descriptive – prose written at the service of 'social commitment', which could have put Van Gogh in a position to make a choice. In addition, the word 'pictorialist' seems problematic. It is quite clear that Van Gogh was interested in socially committed prose, but it is questionable to say that as a consequence of this he became a ready target for Zola's Naturalism, explored that Naturalism, and became a member of the movement. There is no evidence to back up this thesis. Van Gogh never belonged to the Naturalist movement; he admired what it produced, which is something different. Similarly, he admired a representative of Victorianism, Dickens, but that did not make him a member of or to the Victorian school.

Nevertheless, Van Gogh emphasized that 'there is perspective in Dickens too'. Given that it is impossible to create perspective literally in prose, this must be an image; Van Gogh was drawing upon the references shared by both brothers in

order to give his admiration of the English author an additional dimension. He could have said that there was 'relief' in Dickens, 'depth', 'a viewpoint', 'a broad horizon'; this would not have indicated an approach that was *technically* comparable to those that are practised in painting. In this specific case, he talked about 'perspective', and he had just written about books dealing with this technical aspect of pictorial depiction. There is not, however, a cause-and-effect relationship that can demonstrate that Van Gogh read his books in the same way that he looked at a work of art, and that he transposed perspective, studied as it is in painting, into literature. To believe in such a simplistic mechanism is to underestimate considerably Van Gogh's faculties and sensibility; he was sufficiently familiar with literature to be able to appreciate it in its own right; if his status as a painter and his sensibility made him attentive to the descriptive passages in the books he liked, that does not mean that this sensibility conditioned his behaviour as a reader. In his letters, when he wrote about the novels he had read, he much more frequently noted the characters, their personalities and the situations in which they found themselves than the pertinence of the 'pictorial' descriptions he encountered. In the journey which led from the Bible, *Uncle Tom's cabin* and *David Copperfield* to *Candide*, *Bel-Ami* and *Tartarin de Tarascon*, and then to *Pêcheur d'Islande*, that is to say from the works of his relative youth to those of his mature years as a man and as a painter, Naturalism was merely a stage, and the 'pictorial' literary descriptions were merely an artifice that he appreciated – and often admired. Above all, Van Gogh sought out stories, action; if they were accompanied by fine descriptions, so much the better.

His remark on perspective in Dickens should not therefore be taken literally. It quite simply means that according to Van Gogh, Dickens had the knack of presenting things in different lights, which is particularly true in the case of *The mystery of Edwin Drood*, in which the disappearance of one of the protagonists leads to an analysis from several characters' points of view. Over and above the technique used, Van Gogh's taste for Dickens owed everything to the simplicity, sobriety and moral element of the Englishman's work. Dickens's descriptive techniques were totally subordinate to these vital elements. The following passage, from *David Copperfield*, is probably representative of what Van Gogh liked about the English author's work:

When I came out into the rainy street, at twelve o'clock at night, I felt as if I had come from the clouds, where I had been leading a romantic life for ages, to a bawling, splashing, link-lighted, umbrella-struggling, hackney-coach-jostling, patten-clinking, muddy, miserable world.

I had emerged by another door, and stood in the street for a little while, as if I really were a stranger upon earth.¹⁸⁹

In this scene, the principal character has just seen a play, and finds himself once again facing a reality which seems miserable to him, in contrast to the marvels he has just experienced. He feels he is a 'stranger upon earth', which, for example, perfectly echoes what Van Gogh said about 'the good town of Arles' when he arrives there in 1888 and his surroundings seemed to him to belong to another world. 'A stranger upon earth' is undoubtedly the best way of describing the link between Dickens and Van Gogh: the constantly renewed astonishment and freshness that we find in the English novelist's characters, as well as in Van Gogh's paintings, resulting inevitably in the inability of a sensitive soul to adapt to an imperfect world.

Naturalism tested by daily life

In The Hague, Van Gogh's living conditions resembled one of Zola's favourite Naturalist settings: among the least privileged classes, in an urban environment. This proximity played a major part in his taste for this form of literature: it enabled him to recognize situations and actions easily, thus making the text 'applicable', a criterion that was particularly close to his heart. Moreover, it was quite logical that he should abandon Naturalism when he left Paris, which was the main theatre of Naturalist production, stating that the movement had only enabled him to recognize things immediately, citing *La faute de l'abbé Mouret*, which takes place in the Midi, *Le rêve*, which he did not like, and *La terre*, which he used as a descriptive reference for the peasants he mentioned.

Rather than being a revelation, as Michelet had been, Van Gogh's discovery of Naturalism gave him his first opportunity to *criticize* literature. For the first time, we see Van Gogh step back from a text, declaring in a confident tone that Zola does not understand painting very well, and that the painters he describes are 'Impressionists of a sort' [359]. The blind admiration he displayed up to then for his favourite authors gave way, with Zola, to a level-headed, reserved and balanced position. Nor did he position himself like a pupil in front of a teacher, but as an artist who was judging the work of one of his peers.

Setting up home with Sien Hoornik enabled Van Gogh to try and live, on his own terms, as a working man with a wife and children, deserving the bread he earned. He would even refer to the theme of the Nativity to illustrate his situation. The experiment would turn out to be disastrous. What with venereal disease, the forceps delivery of a child, the couple's arguments, assumptions and accusations of physical ugliness, lies, their inability to communicate, and Sien's return to prostitution, not to mention her endless, convoluted family dramas, Van Gogh experienced a life composed of the raw material of Naturalism. He did not work from notes and documents in a cosy office. The condescending tone of an omniscient

narrator, painting the fatalistic portrait of a rotten society whose individuals are programmed to follow the invisible demands of their genes, their environment and their time, did not correspond in any way to what Van Gogh was experiencing. In his letters, the painter adopted the same perspective as Zola. He described Sien as a literary object, whose behaviour he understood although she did not understand it herself, but he was *participating* in the adventure. He was plunged into the raw material, which made him both behave more virtuously and perceive the *reality* of the poor people who populated the Naturalists' pages. And unlike Zola, he gave his Sien a chance. 'This woman is now attached to me like a tame dove – for my part, I can marry only once, and when would be a better time to do it than with her, because only by doing so can I continue to help her, and otherwise hardship will make her take the same road that ends in the abyss.' [224]

Faithful to the spirit of the Gospel and of Michelet, Van Gogh bound his destiny to Sien's: Sien was a lost, wounded pigeon, which he had rescued and tamed. This animal-woman was stupid, bad-tempered and ugly, but she did the housework well, a task for which she seemed best adapted. Pushing the argument to its absurd extreme, one could say that the painter was faithful to the thinking of Carlyle: he hoped that Sien would blossom in the work for which she was created, that is to say the work of a model cleaning-woman. The parallel between his own reality, which he painted, drew and described in his letters, and Naturalist literature, is obvious. We must not, however, conclude because of this parallel that literature showed him the way. Quite the contrary; it was the material and social circumstances that indicated the path of a certain kind of literature to Vincent. Zola's books confirmed some of the painter's views, but were not real sources of inspiration.

As regards technique or methodology, the differences between Zola and Van Gogh are very marked. As Theo was the only cultured, benevolent correspondent the painter had at this time, the letters from his period in The Hague are numerous, detailed and long. In these epistles, Van Gogh recounted, sometimes interminably, how the love between the painter and the prostitute had been revealed, and how these two lovers complemented one another. Vincent considered it was his duty to marry this foul-mouthed woman, to legitimize her affection, legalize her situation, and give a stable framework to a relationship which was not stable by nature. With this intention, which would not come to fruition, Vincent intensified his desire to melt into the society he painted. Consequently he went much further than Zola. The French novelist did his research, while Van Gogh actually experienced life. This difference of attitude is what fundamentally separates Van Gogh from Zola's novels. Van Gogh regarded Zola as an example, admired him as an artist with infinite talent, but at no point did he think of applying Zola's methods, in so far as he knew them, to his art. He allowed himself to be guided by the reality he painted, and not by a way of painting reality.

Van Gogh seems always to have had difficulties in communicating. But the real experience of urban poverty in The Hague brought the painter up against a form of incapacity to communicate which he had not known before. As an intelligent, gifted, cultured artist, who spoke four languages, living with a woman with a limited mind and ambitions, who came from an extremely underprivileged background, he undoubtedly overestimated considerably the solidity of the social bridges he had built between him and her. For Van Gogh, the attraction of Zola's work came among other things from a shared taste for the faithful depiction of reality. But the confrontation between the subjects Zola described in his novels and the realities Van Gogh faced each day could not indefinitely survive the test of time: immersed in his subject, the painter was eventually suffocated, whereas Zola, who invented a reality without participating in it, could go on describing it for ever.¹⁹⁰ For Van Gogh, the method of escape offered by his correspondence with his brother proved insufficient. Reality did not allow him to attain the position of an 'involved spectator' that he had glimpsed in the work of Emile Souvestre and his *Philosophe sous les toits*.

His first doubts on this subject were expressed in the following passage:

I sometimes regret that the woman I'm with can understand as little of books as of art. But (although she definitely can't) isn't the fact that I'm so attached to her nonetheless proof that there's something sincere between us? Later, who knows, she may learn to grasp it, and it may become another bond between us, but now with the children, you understand, she's got enough on her mind.

And through the children, especially, she's in touch with reality and learning by herself. Books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me. I'd find someone who was outside real life tiresome company, but someone who is fully inside it knows and feels by herself. If I didn't seek art in the real, I'd probably find her stupid or something. Now I wish it were otherwise, but I'm still content with the way it is. [312]

After two years, the painter had become disappointed. Naturally, when Van Gogh left The Hague, he justified his abandonment of the relationship by means of numerous procedures and literary references – but he did not refer to Naturalist texts. The painter had already constructed his own system of values, and what Naturalism brought him did not correspond in any way to that system of values. The experience of reading the 'modern French authors' was extremely formative, but the influence exerted upon Vincent was limited to the roles of example and contrast. The masterpieces of Van Gogh's mature years were the culmination of values that had been defined very early on: simplicity, work, humility, and the belief in a 'ray from on high' capable of instilling in the artist such acute sensibility, inspiration and effort that he could reach the extreme limits of his abilities,

necessarily through suffering, the vital driving force of ‘sentiment’, placing him in a position to bring *consolation*. Art is more than a ‘corner of nature seen through a temperament’; it is a means of signifying something, not just describing something. This attitude had already been described in the extract from Michelet’s *L’oiseau* that he copied into one of the *Poetry Albums* for Theo: ‘The true greatness of the artist consists in overshooting his mark, in doing more than he willed; and, moreover, in passing far beyond the goal, in crossing the limits of the possible, and looking beyond – beyond.’¹⁹¹

In The Hague, Van Gogh did not for one moment achieve the simple, hard-working, humble workman’s life he sought; far from it. He found himself caught in the trap of continual, complex and inescapable dramas, from which he eventually fled. Also, it is extremely revealing that, after plunging into the most extreme Naturalism and studying at close quarters the social situations that Zola used as the subject of his books by actually participating in them, Van Gogh left The Hague for Drenthe, longing to get back to the countryside. He subsequently returned home to his parents, who also lived in the country, and became the painter of weavers and the peasant *Potato eaters* (F 1661 JH 737) – his most accomplished work in the Netherlands.

Naturalism as a preserve

Erickson describes the union of Sien and Vincent in the following terms: ‘Van Gogh viewed his caring for Sien and her children as his responsibility to help the unfortunate, something he felt his “good Christian” parents should understand.’¹⁹² This fails to acknowledge that, during this period, the artist made a *strategic* use of religion to justify a union which, quite clearly, rested on less socially-committed realities than those Erickson suggests. Van Gogh was attracted by this woman. Moreover, he was impressed by the way Sien knew how to clean the house and by everything that made her a *useful* presence for him. Most of all, he needed a cheap model. He admitted, also, that Sien was only a second choice, since Kee had turned him down. ‘Circumstances have strengthened’ their ‘love and attachment’. She has ‘devoted herself utterly, with great good will, intelligence and practical skill, to helping me in my work.’ [244] We are a long way from love at first sight, far from any ‘social humanism’, and far from Christ, who did not judge men or women according to their past, and who offered a chance of redemption to anyone who would follow him. Van Gogh was not the saint he has sometimes been made out to be, but a man with desires, as well as an artist with needs.

Van Gogh knew very well that his situation was not *Christian* in the principal meaning of the word, and was aware that his new surroundings were beyond the scope of his father’s imagination. Nevertheless, he was convinced that, if his father

would consent to come and see that his eldest son's situation was completely reasonable, he would encourage him, as a good Christian, to marry his companion – instead of wanting to place his son in the care of a guardian or send him to an asylum, as he had suggested to him in the past. The faith that Van Gogh placed in the impossible wish for his father's blessing was remarkable and displayed his total incapacity for empathy. His attitude demonstrates, if there were any need for this, Van Gogh's ability to transform reality into fiction, a tragic kind of fiction in which he was the steadfast hero. In this instance, he did not grasp for a moment that his father would never be able to bless his union, his escapades or his artistic dreams, out of *affection* for his eldest son. At no time did Van Gogh see that his father had to regard his son's recalcitrance and wanderings above all as an ordeal sent by the Lord, a cross which, as a good believer, he was willing to bear. The failure of communication was total: the Zolaesque reality that his problematic son inhabited – urban, poor, working class, with 'urban morals' – was in total opposition to the one the father was living in, carrying out his profession in a rural setting, in a context of strong social control, and in which a certain form of morality imposed strict rules of conduct.

Van Gogh wanted to rub shoulders with contemporary, living artists, in order to participate fully in the artistic reality of the moment. But contacts with his peers were laborious and problematic. Inevitably, his choices of reading matter show this; in books and their authors he found brothers-in-arms who did not reproach him for his enthusiasm or his impossible manner. Among the latter, Dickens – urban and socially committed – belonged to a different era and culture and consequently permitted only a rather distant comparison with his own reality. But in his drawings, Van Gogh sought to seize the *present* moment, in a 'robust', 'virile' and 'determined' way. Zola's work represented an exemplary literary counterpart to this concern to be contemporary. What is more, Zola was 'new', unknown to those who exercised authoritarian pressure on the painter. Neither Tersteeg nor his parents knew of his books or his theories. With Zola and the 'modern French authors', Vincent could thus create a 'private area' with Theo, which strengthened their bond and their complicity, sheltering him from spiteful gossip.

Vincent therefore became besotted with Zola because of a taste for his 'virile' tone, for the subjects and the themes of his books, because of a determination to grasp his era, and because of the prospect of developing intellectually in a different sphere from those who wanted to dictate his behaviour. Steadily he would read all of the Zola novels that had yet been published, and at the same time he regained a taste for reading and for literary discovery, which he had somewhat neglected during the first months of his stay in The Hague. His attitude to this reading matter mirrored what he had been doing up to then: in order to justify his cohabitation with Sien, he took a secular example of Christian goodness from the second Zola novel he read, *Le ventre de Paris*.

When Vincent's daily life became more stable, and when his situation was eventually *known* to everyone, although not *recognized*, and he could at last busy himself with his work from morning till night as he intended – neglecting almost everything that did not directly concern his art – his interests in literature came back to the fore. During this period, which lasted around eighteen months, from April 1882 to September 1883, the literary references identified in the correspondence intermingle and interpenetrate. Van Gogh continued slowly but surely to construct an intellectual and artistic framework independent of the references of his childhood and the 'jesuitical' pastors, representatives of a world whose limits he abhorred and which he sought to go beyond – as Michelet's swallow sought to 'pass beyond its goal'. This is without doubt one of the fundamental constituents of Van Gogh's genius; he constantly sought out something better than what he had, and, in order to do so, kept his eyes wide open, obstinately rejecting systems and dogmas:

Of course you'll find things in my present watercolours that should be taken out, but that must improve with time.

But you should know that I'm a long way from having a system or anything like that to keep up and lock myself into. That sort of thing exists in H.G.T.'s imagination, for example, rather than in reality. [252]

Although he discovered new, Naturalist literary material, his tastes did not develop enormously. He continued to look for the same themes in the different authors he encountered. His need to turn towards a living, contemporary literature, which guaranteed truth and promised progress, caused him quite naturally to consult the French literature of his time. His native land could not offer anything comparable; Paris was the cultural capital of the planet; the German literature Van Gogh knew belonged to another era, and the English literature of his time was alien to his daily life – so it was consequently neither 'applicable', nor 'practical'. In short, Van Gogh was quite simply following a certain literary and artistic actuality, without entering into its finest subtleties or into excessively laborious explorations (there was never any mention of Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Nerval or Mérimée in his letters).

He believed that the noblest and highest vocation for an artist was to create art for the common people¹⁹³ – or rather, as Thoré had put it, 'art for MANKIND'.¹⁹⁴ The French novels of his time were, in many cases, the results of this same ambition. It is therefore very natural that Van Gogh's reading matter should have consisted increasingly frequently of the French works of his time, dealing wherever possible with working-class, urban themes, which corresponded well with his own surroundings. This does not mean that he actually espoused Naturalism. Van Gogh also understood that he had no chance of living by his art if he depicted what

had already been done. He knew the art world and the mechanisms of the market well enough to be aware that he must follow contemporary developments in order to participate in them. As he read Zola, he distanced himself from an ossified, conservative and dogmatic world. This choice therefore stemmed as much from his taste for Zola as from the rejection of the cultural world of his parents, and was as necessary to his aspirations as it was to his ambitions.

Zola was not the only author Van Gogh was reading at this time. The organizer of the soirées at Médan shares the honours with Hugo, Balzac, Flaubert, Daudet and Erckmann-Chatrian. This series of names could constitute a reading programme designed to illustrate the literary realism of the nineteenth century, ranging from Hugo's realist stammerings to Balzac's meticulous descriptive studies, then from Erckmann-Chatrian's historical and popular subjects to Flaubert's well-documented, plausible works, and finally from Zola's obsession with veracity to Daudet's caricatural liberties. Van Gogh 'explored' 'Zola's Naturalism', as Sund states, but he did not subscribe to it. As an artist drawn to realism in the name of values like simplicity and authenticity, Van Gogh quite simply explored literature in order to discover what the nineteenth century had to offer him on his favourite themes.

Instead of burdening himself with a system of thought, precepts or a method, he preferred to develop his notion of the *type*, to progress in the art of the *unfinished*, and to search for the *power of expression*. It was in The Hague that he found his poetic strength, acquiring a manner that he called 'virile'; stated his values, which made it possible to convey 'real feeling'; and took a step back, declaring his independence of mind. In other words, he 'matured in the storm' [133], convinced that he would only be recognized one day if he remained faithful to his deepest beliefs.

His reading of Zola's works coincided with the appearance of early signs that he was declaring his difference. He stopped imitating, copying models from drawing manuals, and began a quest for his own style. At the same time, literature no longer took the sacred place it had occupied with Thomas à Kempis and Michelet. Truths were no longer thrust forward as absolute and definitive: the modern French authors were not turned into evangelists in the manner of Beecher Stowe, but were representatives of an artistic actuality. It was in this way that 'Zola clears the mind' [250]: he made it possible to better understand an era, forced one to confront reality, inspired the possibility that a work of art could be derived from daily life, in all its simplicity and all its splendour.

At the same time, the influence of the work of Dickens and Eliot, which he had known for a long time, remained quite considerable. This influence was undoubtedly more important than that of the French authors he explored, as Ronald Pickvance has shown.¹⁹⁵

The need for authenticity

Increasingly viewing literature as a companion, and less and less as a teacher, Van Gogh developed his artistic approaches in a completely personal, idiosyncratic way. He believed in the need for a 'serious sadness', which dated from his religious period, during which he was very fond of St Paul and the verse in 2 Corinthians 6:10: 'As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.' Faithful to his rugged nature, Van Gogh believed that his brush had to be coarse if it was going to express this sadness authentically. According to him, coarseness did not preclude delicacy or depth, if it expressed sincere feeling.

He perceived within himself 'a power in me that I must develop, a fire that I may not put out but must fan' [292]. His taste for the type grew ever stronger. His descriptions of autumn effects, in controlled language and composed with care, were written with disarming sincerity, and testify to an unusually strong visual sensibility. Some passages from his letters are real fragments of literature, more successful than many of his drawings at that time:

Today I worked on old drawings from Etten, because I saw the pollard willows again in a similar leafless state here in the field, and what I had seen last year came to mind again.

Sometimes I long so much to do landscape, just as one would for a long walk to refresh oneself, and in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were. A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of orphan men.

Young corn can have something ineffably pure and gentle about it that evokes an emotion like that aroused by the expression of a sleeping child, for example.

The grass trodden down at the side of a road looks tired and dusty like the inhabitants of a poor quarter. After it had snowed recently I saw a group of Savoy cabbages that were freezing, and that reminded me of a group of women I had seen early in the morning at a water and fire cellar in their thin skirts and old shawls. [292]

Here, Van Gogh used rustic images which he juxtaposed with working-class subjects. The link suggested is visual, but the effect is much deeper; the effect of the comparisons is one of human compassion: the pollarded willows are reminiscent of a procession of old men from the hospice, because in the trees he sees 'expression and a soul, as it were'; the young wheat is as soft as a sleeping child, and the little group of cabbages reminds him of women who have been toiling since dawn. By demonstrating in the same breath, in the same inspiration, characteristics of the

most vulnerable individuals in his society – old men, the child and women – Van Gogh went far beyond the narrow framework of ‘word painting’. He sketched a section of humanity with a line of trees, a little trampled grass and some cabbages! The images used are touching, authentic and poignant. In fact they are even upsetting, as he intended them to be.

Nature, then, was only ever a point of departure, and its description an instrument used to express an intimate distress, a small part of the human soul laid bare. In looking for types and typical aspects of reality, Van Gogh was looking, within reality, for forms that were increasingly refined, and consequently increasingly expressive of this part of ‘the bared soul, this ‘feeling for nature’. That is why he owed it to himself, as an artist, to ‘grasp nature at close quarters’, to understand it as a whole, by remaining as genuine as possible.

Of course I can’t read a book about Paris without instantly thinking of you. I also can’t read a book about Paris without to some extent also finding The Hague in it, which is admittedly smaller than Paris but still a court city with corresponding morals.

When you say in your last letter ‘what a riddle there is in nature’, I echo your words. Life in the abstract is already a riddle, reality turns it into a riddle within a riddle.

And who are we to solve it? All the same, we ourselves form a particle of it, of the society of which we ask, Where is it going, to the devil or to God?

Yet the sun rises, says V. Hugo.

Long, long ago, in *L’ami Fritz* by Erckmann-Chatrian, I read a remark by the old rabbi that has often come to mind since: ‘We are not alive in order to be happy, but we must try to deserve happiness.’ Taken in isolation, this thought seems a little pedantic, at least one *could* interpret it as a little pedantic, but in the context in which the remark occurred, namely on the lips of the sympathetic figure of old Rabbi David Sechel, it struck me deeply and I often think of it. Also when drawing – one shouldn’t count on selling one’s drawings, but one has a duty to make them such that they have value and are serious. For one may not become nonchalant or indifferent, even if one is disappointed by one’s circumstances. [292]

This passage, taken from the same letter as the preceding one, shows that Van Gogh saw *reality*, and consequently his own reality – the *society* in which he lived, which inspired him and which he painted – as the equivalent of *nature*. The painter wondered if this society, in which he felt he was a speck of dust, was going in the right direction. ‘Yet the sun rises’: nature has no interest in human metaphysical questions, it is what it is and it continues imperturbably on its way. As an elementary particle of a soulless nature, with an indiscernible destiny, the artist feels ‘in

the abstract'; he is preoccupied by intellectual and artistic, 'intangible' things, unlike the workmen he draws, who live in the concrete world. This 'abstract' state complicates the enigma of nature, since participation in the thing depicted is inevitably limited; he knows he cannot dig and paint at the same time, and yet, in order to understand this action, he must carry it out, feel it, experience it. Hence the necessary enigma, the indispensable, incompressible distance, which made Michelet say: '... hence the sublime folly of weeping for misfortunes which he has never experienced.'⁹⁶

Despite this reservation, Van Gogh was convinced that by remaining faithful to himself, dedicated body and soul to his art, he would reach the goal he had set himself, despite any failures to come. He was not there to 'be happy', but to *deserve* happiness. He wanted to reach out towards something, not attain something. His art, the humble expression of simple, typical things, which subordinated the narrowness of realism to *feeling*, necessarily involved hard work, suffering and sacrifice. Thus, it is in The Hague that Van Gogh transformed his sensibility into an artistic objective, and turned his penchants into a mission, which he would never again lose sight of, and which would be as much the key to his success as the cause of his downfall. Christian values as such had foundered once and for all, to be replaced by their secular and republican equivalents. When, during these years of apprenticeship in The Hague, Van Gogh amalgamated nature and society, and declared that he could no longer see its direction, whether good or bad, he achieved his independence once and for all: he was alone on his boat, in the middle of an ocean whose depth, extent and limits were unknown to him.

Now armed with only his own way of seeing things, he observed *nature*, which includes all human activities. This does not mean that he abandoned all forms of morality. Nevertheless, the morality he defended from his move to The Hague onwards was more and more frequently of an aesthetic nature. What was beautiful seemed to influence what was just, and not the other way round. Towards the end of his life, his interest in what was right was pushed into the background: in the last two hundred letters of his correspondence, there would no longer be any concern about what was just or unjust, but solely what was beautiful – and occasionally what was not.

As he came into contact with Naturalist literature, Van Gogh used moralizing and philosophizing to create for himself a rather hazy *art poétique*, based essentially on values he used to appreciate in the Christian faith that he has now rejected. His social environment continued to obsess him: he kept reminding his brother that he continually had to defend himself, justify himself, that he was misunderstood, that at first he would doubtless sell nothing, but that he would succeed in investing his work with a 'value' which would considerably exceed any monetary worth it might have. Convinced that he was right, and regarding Naturalism as proof that his artistic projects were feasible (art can be useful, beautiful, simple and sad at

the same time), Van Gogh called Theo to witness as he demonstrated the coherence of what he was doing – where necessary betraying the very examples he claimed to espouse in the process.

Thus, after previously stating that he considered it necessary to prepare for a future composed of *reason* and *conscience*, he wrote that he was well aware that Victor Hugo ‘analyzes in a different way from Balzac and Zola, but he sees through things too’ [338]. When he contrasted the poet Hugo’s method (or absence of method) with the realist methods of Balzac and Zola, at the same time stating that conscience must accompany reason, he betrayed his impression that Naturalism was amoral, ‘without conscience’, and could therefore in no way be consoling, the prime quality he expected of a successful work of art. Consolation was central to Van Gogh’s preoccupations, but at no point did he link it with Naturalism. In fact, he would say in Arles that Naturalism was ‘hardly consoling’ [672].

Given all these factors, it seems unlikely that Naturalism influenced Van Gogh in the way Sund describes. Naturalist novels were a pastime which the painter enjoyed, and some of them may have influenced his behaviour, his arguments or his choices. However, this influence did not stem from the fact that the novels in question were Naturalist, but from the fact that a situation, a description, or an action was ‘applicable’ at a given moment in his life. When he justified his rescue of Sien by resorting to the example of Madame François, who rescues young Florent in *Le ventre de Paris*, Van Gogh was not linking Naturalism with his personal situation; he was merely recognizing an example of generosity, which he used to convince Theo that his actions were well-founded.

The end of the Hague studio

The daily lot of an artist with a wife and children eventually overwhelmed Vincent’s good intentions. Effortlessly and without distaste, the painter concluded that it was impossible to continue living with Sien. He also declared that he missed the countryside, and decided to head for the Drenthe region, in the north-eastern Netherlands, to paint country subjects.

Towards the end of his stay in The Hague, he was remarkably clear-sighted about his fate:

For many a painter this is something intolerable, or almost intolerable, at least. One wants to be an honest man, and one is, one works just as hard as a porter, and yet one falls short, one has to give the work up, one sees no chance of carrying it out without spending more on it than one will get back for it. One has a feeling of guilt, of falling short, of not keeping promises, one isn’t honest as one would be if the work was paid for at its natural, fair price. One is afraid

to make friends, one is afraid to stir, one would like to call out to people from a distance like one of the old lepers: Don't come too close, for contact with me will bring you sorrow and harm. With this whole avalanche of cares in one's heart, one must set to work with a calm, everyday face, without moving a muscle, carry on with daily life, try things out with the models, with the man who comes to collect the rent, in short, with all and sundry. One must cool-headedly keep one hand on the tiller to continue the work, and with the other hand try to ensure that one does no harm to others. And then come storms, things one hadn't foreseen; one doesn't know what to do, and one has a feeling that one may hit a rock at any moment.

One can't present oneself as somebody who can be of benefit to others or who has an idea for a business that's bound to be profitable – no, on the contrary, it's to be expected that it will end with a deficit and yet, yet, one feels a power seething inside one, one has a task to do and it must be done.

One would like to speak like the men of 93, we must do this and that, first those, then those, then the last will die, it's a duty so it goes without saying, and nothing more need be added.

Yet this is the time to combine and to speak.

Or is it rather that, given that many have fallen asleep and don't wish to be woken up, one must try to confine oneself to things that one can finish alone, which one faces alone and has sole responsibility for? So that those who sleep can go on sleeping and rest. Now you see that this time I too am expressing more intimate thoughts than normally; you're to blame for this, because you did the same. [288]

Van Gogh's 'more intimate thoughts' tell us that he was thinking about his fate a great deal, but without much hope. He suspected that his artistic adventure would not be crowned with success. He painted himself as a victim of his own honesty, and affected such touching resignation that it verges on mawkishness. The language he uses is steeped in literature. The way he sets out the facts resembles an exercise in rhetoric. The reasoning was implacable: as a good painter, he had simply done the only thing he could, in all conscience, like other painters. The fact that he had not earned any money was society's fault, not his.

In 1883, Vincent left The Hague in order to paint the countryside, just like his friend Van Rappard. Following his usual pattern, he used an image derived from literary history to inform Theo of his break with Sien: he drew parallels with the break between Alfred de Musset and George Sand: 'Why, why is the woman so unwise? She's what Musset has called "A child of the age" through and through – and I sometimes think of the ruin of Musset himself when I consider her future.' [383]

Musset, indeed, never recovered from his break with Sand. He abandoned himself to a life of debauchery, and the quality of his literary output suffered. It is this

debauchery to which Van Gogh was referring when he said that he feared for Sien's future. According to the painter, the former prostitute would undoubtedly return to prostitution, egged on by her mother.

His programme of reading during the last weeks in The Hague was a perfect continuation of his exploration of nineteenth-century French literature: Hugo, Zola, Daudet, Goncourt, Erckmann-Chatrian, Michelet... first and foremost, works which are Naturalist or verge on Naturalism. Literature remained the principal bridge linking Vincent to Theo: each difficult situation was explained with recourse to works of fiction. After using the Musset example, a few lines further on in the same letter, he cited the words of Jesus Christ, the heroine of Zola's *Nana*, a quotation from Proudhon, a quotation from Michelet, then Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. According to Van Gogh, literature currently embraced 'types', a fact that he pointed out to so that Theo would fully grasp what he was saying.¹⁹⁷

This idea of the type, which had long preoccupied Van Gogh, was clearly defined towards the end of his stay in The Hague: 'My aim is to do a drawing that not exactly everyone will understand, the figure expressed in its essence in simplified form, with deliberate disregard of those details that aren't part of the true character and are merely accidental.' [361]

The second extremely important idea that he developed and defined towards the end of his stay in The Hague was his belief that the soul is elevated by work, and that idleness leads to the vilest depths. He always reiterated this idea in connection with Sien, for whom he could not envisage a positive outcome if she would not agree to find a job. This idea originated in a social context imbued with Calvinism, and had been strengthened by Van Gogh's reading of Carlyle and Michelet.

Motivated by these undeniably authoritative examples, Van Gogh explored and deepened his knowledge of Naturalist and realist authors while holding on to his own values. What he retained from these books was what corresponded to these pre-existing values, with the addition of new pointers for reflection. He changed and matured as he came into contact with Naturalist works, measured his own views and output against Zola's books, and dreamt of a school of artists or painters, capable of rivalling the Naturalists' work. His reading strengthened his beliefs, rather than transforming them.¹⁹⁸ Through the failure of his relationship with Sien, and the realization that the urban setting did not match his deep aspirations as an artist in search of authenticity, the two years he spent in The Hague showed him that modern French novels could show life as it was, but did not in any way determine his own working methods. By reading Zola, Daudet, Flaubert and the Goncourts, he was able to participate in modern artistic life, and escape his oppressive home background; lastly, he saw the Naturalist school as an example that could be followed by an association of artists. As he had not achieved any form of exchange, association or rivalry among the other artists in The Hague,

he followed the example of Rappard and set off into the Drenthe countryside. A letter written towards the end of November 1883 is very representative of his state of mind at this key moment in his life. This was a new stage in his emancipation: he had freed himself from his home background by going to The Hague, and now he was freeing himself from the city to return to the countryside and nature. The stay in The Hague consequently appears as a necessary stage in his emancipation, putting him in a position to return to his parents' home in the countryside without taking a backward step. Important intellectual work was done between Etten and Nuenen, and Van Gogh's beliefs had become stronger; now he was able to move from theory to practice.

What I think is the best life, oh without even the slightest shadow of a doubt, is a life made up of long years of being in touch with nature out of doors – and with the something on high – unfathomable, 'awfully Unnameable', because one can't find a name for it – above that nature. Be a peasant – be, if that were fitting at the present time, a village clergyman or schoolmaster – be, and given the present time that's the form that seems to me to be the most fitting, be a Painter – and in so doing as a person you will, after that spell of years of outdoor life and manual work, as a person you will, in the end and in the passage of years, gradually become something better and deeper. I firmly believe this.
[403]

Further on in the same letter, he lingered over what he believed to constitute 'the soul of modern civilization': 'The eternal, the very greatest simplicity and truth – Dupré, Daubigny, Corot, Millet, Israëls, Herkomer – not to mention Michelet, Hugo, Zola, Balzac, a host more from the more distant and more recent past.'

Simplicity, truth, work. Three values which had been strengthened with time, and which would serve as a basis for all of Vincent Van Gogh's work and artistic impressions. The judgements he delivered on the work of his peers, his opinions about what he had read, and his apprehensiveness about other people would essentially be influenced by these three elements. To summarize: as regards Van Gogh's own poetic art, it seems that for him, only *work* – which consists of *simplifying* observed nature – enables one to arrive at *truth*, the artist's ultimate goal. For only 'truth' obtained in this way, not by imitating nature but by making it clearer, can lead to consolation. Unfortunately Van Gogh did not develop his notion of the 'white ray'. He regarded this ray as unnameable and 'above nature'. His faith now hung upon this unnameable 'above nature': it is the role reserved for the artist, his energy and his certainty, which enables him to *recreate* nature instead of *depicting* it.

Light, colours, speed of execution, the Japanese style and the audacious compositions that would follow: all these would be used to serve these fundamental

ideas, which matured in The Hague. His reading programme shows the effects of this: among the modern authors, he would very quickly show a preference for Erckmann-Chatrian, Daudet and Maupassant, writers who employed greater simplification than Zola or the Goncourts; his interest in Naturalism was in decline.

7

Nuenen: The painter of peasants

In June 1885, in Nuenen, Vincent van Gogh wrote:

The drawback to painting is that if one doesn't sell one's paintings one still has to have money for paints and models to make progress. And that drawback is ugly. But otherwise – painting and, to my mind, particularly painting peasant life, gives peace of mind, even though one has a lot of scraping along and wretchedness on the outside of life. I mean painting is a home, and one doesn't have that homesickness, that peculiar thing that Hennebeau had.

The passage I copied out then struck me very much because, almost literally at that time, I had just such a longing to be something like a grass-mower or polder worker.

And I was sick of the boredom of civilization. It is better, one is happier if one puts it into effect – but pretty much literally – at least one feels really alive. And it is something to be deep in the snow in winter, to be deep in the yellow leaves in the autumn, to be deep in the ripe wheat in the summer, to be deep in the grass in the spring. It is something to always be with the mowers and the peasant girls, in summer with the big sky above, in the winter by the black fireplace. And to feel – this has always been so and always will be.

One may sleep on straw, eat rye bread – well then, in the long run one is the healthier for it. [509]

Homesickness, which was experienced by Hennebeau, the engineer at the Montsou mine in *Germinal*, seemed strange to Vincent. As far as he was concerned, there is an interior to life: painting, which is like a house, a home. The painter cannot feel homesick as long as he remains inside this house, for it is *something* to be with the peasants, as Millet was. The outside of life, financial worries and the lack of success, are secondary. Eighteen months before Van Gogh

wrote this letter with its tranquil, resigned tone, the soul's repose was not part of his reality.

Drenthe: a brief, failed experiment

After leaving The Hague, Van Gogh headed for Drenthe, a region in the north-east of the Netherlands. He was to stay there, in a landscape of misty peat bogs and scattered little farms, for eight weeks: long enough to realize that he was not capable of painting such challenging countryside in such a sad season, with so few contacts, so little means, and so many recent heartbreaks to mull over.

The letters from this brief period are highly informative. In them Van Gogh took stock, reflected on his future, and took a strange decision: he urged his brother to come and join him, to become a painter at his side.

Come on, old chap, come and paint with me on the heath, in the potato field, come and walk with me behind the plough and the shepherd – come and stare into the fire with me – just let the storm that blows across the heath blow through you. Break out. I don't know the future, how it could be different or not, whether everything will go well for us. But all the same I can't speak otherwise. Don't look for it in Paris, don't look for it in America, it's all the same, always exactly the same. Change indeed, look for it on the heath. [396]

Disarming in its naivety, this proposition displays both Vincent's sincerity and his blindness. Obviously Theo did not join him, despite numerous attempts at persuasion and warnings against the decadent spirit of Paris, which was liable to transform a genuine person into a 'tulip merchant', in other words a boor whose only interest is in money. Vincent's course of action can undoubtedly be explained by loneliness: feeling sad, Vincent was quite simply in need of an understanding companion.

Vincent faced terrible disillusionment. The path he had decided to follow was becoming blurred and uncertain. In the Drenthe countryside, just where he had looked to find the humble, dignified and genuine people he had known in his youth, he encountered only suspicion, distance and incomprehension. In The Hague, he had been able to perfect his technique, find and lay claim to a style that tended towards the coarse and unfinished; on an intellectual level, he had had an opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge of the artistic theories of the moment, at the same time freeing himself from all forms of organized religion; he had liberated himself even from the idea of following a trend or a movement. But his greater courage and ambitions could not resist the cold November rain for long. His few glimmers of hope ended up melting into the darkness that surrounded

him. He was short of money, the ploughing was coming to an end, the temperature was falling ... the seductive idea of being surrounded by nature and managing to create real, genuine art through hard work, accompanied by the necessary melancholy, was not enough to give Vincent the energy to bear the loneliness.

It was, however, in these desolate landscapes, isolated from everyone, that he clear-sightedly expressed what he expected from an 'artistic life'. When we think of the 'rugged' man Van Gogh was, and of his *Sunflowers*, we cannot but conclude that he followed the path he thought was necessary for any artist:

What you write about Serret interests me greatly. A man like that who eventually produces something heart-rending as blossom from a hard and difficult life is a phenomenon like the blackthorn, or better yet a gnarled old apple tree which suddenly bears blossoms that are among the tenderest and most 'pure' things under the sun.

When a rough man blossoms – it's indeed a beautiful sight – but HE has had to endure an awful lot of cold winters before then – more than even the later sympathizers know.

The artist's life and WHAT an artist is, that's very curious – how deep is it – infinitely deep. [408]

But just at this moment in Van Gogh's career, the infinite depth of the artistic life was no longer sufficient to make the situation tolerable. So he threw in the towel and went home to his parents, in November 1883, for emotional and practical reasons, his nerves on edge. Doubtless he wanted some breathing space, to get his health back, before setting off again to wander the countryside in search of 'corners of nature' to highlight. He did not return to the family home, to those 'Jesuits' full of prejudices, who did not understand 'the soul of modern civilization', because of any desire for reconciliation or through nostalgia. As he headed for Nuenen, at the age of almost thirty, Vincent felt that he was making a great effort to be sociable, to prove his goodwill. Those who greeted him felt the same way: they took it upon themselves to welcome the depressed painter, and they tried as best they could to prove that they meant him well.

Conflicts and lack of communication

There was no shortage of reasons for conflict between Vincent and his parents. The impossible way he dressed, his aggressive tone, his obstinacy and his mood swings contrasted with his parents' gentleness and tranquillity. Faced with them, Vincent's attitude was characterized by permanent rebellion, refusal to submit, intransigence at every moment and on every level. It seems that the painter had

always been like this. Based on the account given to her by Vincent's mother, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger wrote that the family's eldest child was a difficult one to bring up.¹⁹⁹ Van Gogh's independence of mind did not suddenly appear, under the influence of a book, a painter, a mystical revelation or a traumatizing experience. Nor did it originate in that terrible cod-psychology found in a number of biographies of Vincent, which state that he was a 'replacement child', because he bore the same Christian name as the Van Gogh household's first-born son, who was stillborn a year to the day before the birth of the man who was to paint *Starry night*.²⁰⁰

Certain authors have not hesitated to declare that Van Gogh suffered from a lack of affection.²⁰¹ They conjure up a cold, narrow-minded, austere father and a mother who was distant. This is completely mistaken. First of all because the affection that was shown to him by his parents is not quantifiable – especially given the evidence we now have at our disposal in order to measure it; but also because Van Gogh was as resistant to his parents' affection as he was to their ideas. He did not lack for affection, but he was incapable of accepting it. It is not surprising that the only person who always remained loyal to him, his brother Theo, has been described as being extraordinarily gentle, restrained, kind and patient; a less disinterested, less devoted, less understanding brother would have forced Van Gogh to choose a more down-to-earth – and above all less expensive – path. The two brothers' parents, the very models of patience, attempted as best they could to direct their eldest child towards more assured prospects than this art, which they did not understand. Their regrettable clumsiness led inevitably to misunderstandings. As soon as Vincent arrived, for example, Pastor Van Gogh believed he was doing the right thing by buying him some clothes. The artist saw this as a reproach: he thought that the way he was dressed made his family ashamed. Now, despite the disputes, the disagreements and the social pressure, this family consented to take their thirty year-old son back under their roof, a son whose plans and activities were positively ruinous for one of his brothers. That there was a lack of understanding is without question. But to state that there was a lack of affection is to insult the memory of a couple who constantly sought to help their children find a place in their society, and who believed in their own system of values. It is futile to search for a 'guilty party', a 'culprit' as the source of the misfortunes of a man who may seem like a tragic hero, innocent and persecuted by a malevolent destiny. Van Gogh does not owe his posthumous glory to factors beyond his control, but on the contrary, to everything he himself did.

Vincent's return to his parents' home in Nuenen, in 1883, is one of the clearest proofs of the kindness of those parents, even though they were disorientated and helpless in the face of their child's unpredictable, incomprehensible behaviour. Perhaps they told themselves that he would be in less danger in the innocent, familiar surroundings of their little village than in a city, where he had already shown that he could not protect himself against the thousand perils that surrounded him

– although not harbouring many illusions about their ability to change the course of things or influence their eldest child's choices. Too kind, too Christian to send him back to his loneliness, they accepted their suffering patiently and attempted to do everything in their power to smooth things over ... which could only exasperate their son, who could not bear things to run smoothly.²⁰²

The first letter Vincent sent from Nuenen is steeped in melancholy. He quotes a French language book (which has not been identified), from which he extracts a strange part of a sentence, which must be placed in its context in order to attempt to grasp its meaning.

I thought of you brother, on my long trudge across the heath on that stormy evening. I thought of a passage, I don't know which book it's from, two eyes awake, brightened by genuine tears – I thought, I am disillusioned, that is – I thought – I have believed in many things that I now know are in a sorry state at bottom – I thought, these eyes of mine, here on this gloomy evening, awake here in the solitude, if there have been tears in them from time to time, why should they not have been wrung from me by such sorrow that it disenchantments – yes – and banishes illusions – but at the same time – awakens one? [409]

The shaky grammar of this phrase, which is just as inaccessible in Dutch as it is in the translation given here, allows us to glimpse a 'disenchantment' which is as powerful as it is necessary, as well as the manifest confusion holding sway in the mind of the man who wrote these lines. Here, his creed, 'maturing in the storm', is applied in an almost literal fashion. The disenchantment he speaks of may have many faces: is he referring to his failure as an employee in the art trade? To his abortive plan to become a priest? To Kee Vos's refusal to marry him? To the quarrel with Mauve? To Hermanus Tersteeg's hostility? To his break-up with Sien? To his inability to find the energy to remain in Drenthe? To his failure to communicate with his own parents? These are all possible answers, although none is sufficient on its own. But there is no doubt that taken together, they justify a total, profound state of disillusionment. The pain which this series of failures made him feel, and about which he is quite lucid, must have been very difficult to manage. Van Gogh has only two things left to hold onto: the hope provided by his idea that suffering is necessary to artistic creation, a paradoxical comfort, and an obvious echo of 2 Corinthians 6:10,²⁰³ and the affection of his brother Theo. It is difficult to state that his parents also represented a positive constant in his life. However, it is to their home that he went at this difficult moment, and we may assume that he had headed there, despite his grand ideas and his recalcitrant personality, to seek a little human warmth and a little affection. In addition, he may have considered his parents' welcome as his right, since he undoubtedly felt that his failures were in part attributable to his family's lack of encouragement and failure to understand.

When he wrote this letter, he had only just arrived at the family home. He has also just made a long journey, for the most part on foot (he says it 'began with a walk of more than 6 hours'), during which he was able to think about his situation. He undertook this journey to a large extent because he was suffering from loneliness. One can imagine a depressed painter, travelling on foot in miserable November weather, aware that he has begun his career too late, unknown, mocked, forlorn, barely out of the breakdown of a difficult relationship, and trusting no one but his brother; a man who had resigned himself, probably in a surge of affection and certainly through pique, to head home to the parents he blamed for a thousand things.

The painter did not receive the welcome he had anticipated. He aspired to the 'infinitely deep', but came up against the infinitely superficial – although this did not prevent him remaining in Nuenen for nearly two years. As soon as he had arrived at his parents' house, he sensed a good deal of kindness and benevolence, but he also heard what was not said out loud, and he sensed the prevailing circum-spection only too acutely. Immediately his desire to entrust his thoughts to paper manifested itself, and he conducted a literary exercise in order to share his impressions of the moment with Theo. The tension that Vincent's arrival had caused in his father's house is palpable.

Dear brother,

I feel what Pa and Ma instinctively think about me (I don't say reasonably).

There's a similar reluctance about taking me into the house as there would be about having a large, shaggy dog in the house. He'll come into the room with wet paws – and then, he's so shaggy. He'll get in everyone's way. And he barks so loudly.

In short – it's a dirty animal.

Very well – but the animal has a human history and, although it's a dog, a human soul, and one with finer feelings at that, able to feel what people think about him, which an ordinary dog can't do.

And I, admitting that I am a sort of dog, accept them as they are.

This home is also too good for me, and Pa and Ma and the family are so unduly fine (no feelings, though) and – and – they are ministers – many ministers. So the dog recognizes that if they were to keep him it would be too much a question of putting up with him, of tolerating him 'IN THIS HOUSE', so he'll see about finding himself a kennel somewhere else.

The dog may actually have been Pa's son at one time, and Pa himself really left him out in the street rather too much, where he inevitably became rougher, but since Pa himself forgot that years ago and actually never thought profoundly about what a bond between father and son meant, there's nothing to be said.

Then – the dog might perhaps bite – if he were to go mad – and the village constable would have to come round and shoot him dead. Very well – yes, all that, most certainly, it is true.

On the other hand, dogs are guards. But there's no need for that, it's peace, and there's no danger, there are no problems, they say. So then I keep silent.

The dog is just sorry that he didn't stay away, because it wasn't as lonely on the heath as it is in this house – despite all the friendliness. The animal's visit was a weakness that I hope people will forget, and one that he'll avoid lapsing into again. [413]

Just as he had written this last sentence, Vincent received a letter from Theo, in which his younger brother reproached him in no uncertain terms for being a burden to their father. All at once, when he resumed his letter, Vincent changed tone to prove both more conciliatory and more intransigent: he consented to put some water in his wine, while remaining convinced that he was right, among people who are wrong. 'Let me tell you that I didn't know that someone aged 30 was "a boy", particularly not when he may have experienced more than just anyone in those 30 years.' [413]

By stating that he had been greeted like a dog, was regarded as a child, and that his father was guilty of letting him wander when he ought to have been building up bonds with his son, Vincent positioned himself outside his family. Scarred by his stay in Drenthe, more mature after his two years in The Hague, he had fashioned himself a breastplate of innermost suffering and unshakeable beliefs, and was less inclined than ever to bear the remarks, reproaches or advice of his parents.

So Van Gogh had to face up to a very harsh reality, in which his intransigent attitude became a heavy social handicap. However, far from being sickened or wearied, he seems to have fed on the polemics and scandals to which his presence gave rise. The entire little world of Nuenen was caught up in a whirlwind as the prevailing social codes were repeatedly violated. And as the social pressure increased, and the painter isolated himself from the world, his convictions became stronger: 'do drop me a line sometimes, because I'm speaking to no one here.' [456]

Each admonition from his father was for Van Gogh evidence of the pastor's inability to understand the reality of the world that surrounded him. Prudence, and his mother's desire for conciliation, were interpreted as proof of hypocrisy. Socially isolated, alone against everyone, the painter read an enormous amount, as much to pass the time as to escape Nuenen. He dived back into the poetry of Coppée and Breton, even copying out a series of poems for his friend Van Rappard, one of which was entitled 'Sadly', another 'Desire in melancholy', another 'Sorrow assuaged', another 'A wound reopened'... There were numerous variations on the

themes of autumn, solitude or disappointed love, and there was a great deal of reading matter from his youth, which he rediscovered in his father's house. The poem 'The lost dog' by François Coppée, which recalled his image-filled description of the welcome he had received, is heavy with meaning in the context of his difficult cohabitation with his parents:

It seems to say: Come on, please take me home, won't you?
 People are touched, yet they lack courage;
 They're poor themselves – they're afraid of rabies
 Finally – nastily – they brandish
 Their walking sticks – and say to the dog: Be off with you!
 And – contritely – it goes and makes its offer to someone else. [433]²⁰⁴

Just as reading *L'oiseau* by Michelet had inspired him to compare his own situation with that of a bird in a cage,²⁰⁵ it would seem that Coppée's lost dog gave him the idea of comparing himself to a dog.

As regards prose, the novels he read invariably carry him off to France, to countryside which was less and less idealized, more and more realistic, towards the French Revolution according to Hugo, and finally, and above all, through so-called naturalist novels, towards what was then regarded as the world capital of culture, and of painting in particular: Paris.

Truth versus reality: the father as woman and the son as dog

Proudhon says, woman is the desolation of the righteous man. I think that one can feel and understand these words even if one has absolutely no pretensions to being 'a righteous man' or of passing oneself off as one. Although a minister in general, but more specifically Pa in particular, isn't a woman, it seems to me that there's something similarly inexpressibly desperate in his manner of speaking and acting at certain moments.

A phenomenon that I've often tried to analyze but which remains a mystery to me, to which I can give no other or more correct definition than Hugo's words, 'he has the black ray', or the words of someone else, 'the most gentle of cruel men.' [415]

Cohabitation between Vincent, the shaggy dog, and his father, the despairing woman, was impossible and an ordeal for both parties. Literature exacerbated the misunderstanding: the pastor, who feared the bad influence of the French authors of his time, saw his own son devouring the books of Zola, Daudet, Flaubert and Hugo.

The situation became even more complicated when the painter fell in love again. The object of his affections this time was a local woman, Margot Begemann, a simple soul hardly capable of integrating socially, and twelve years his senior. True to type, Vincent expressed the desire to marry her. In the face of general disapproval, Margot decided to take poison, although she did not succeed in committing suicide. In order to relate this episode to Theo, Vincent referred to the 'first Madame Bovary', who died from an attack caused by bad news. Thus he gave a fictional character to the event, taking up a position as an observer, but at no time did he seem capable of empathy. The profound pain of Margot Begemann, which made her decide to put an end to her life, was not even mentioned to Theo. Vincent merely indicated that he had not seen this desperate act coming.

Two factors in this unfortunate episode are of vital importance. The first is an inability to perceive and understand another person's feelings. It seems that Van Gogh was capable of grasping the 'intimate griefs' of humanity, but remained blind to the feelings of those close to him. Although intimately linked to Margot, he still did not understand her despair. He could not grasp that, for such a fragile personality, the intensity and complexity of the situation to which he was exposing her was totally unmanageable; that the outcome of their relationship could not be anything but tragic. The second factor is his eternal recourse to literature to inform Theo of the most striking events in his existence. The reference used here, 'the first Madame Bovary', is noteworthy. It could indicate that he had consulted Flaubert's novel recently. This is a detail of apparently minor importance which would not be likely to leave a lasting impression on the reader's mind – although this is precisely the kind of detail that left a mark upon Van Gogh. What ought to have been – the straightforward marriage of Monsieur and the first Madame Bovary – is swept away by what is. Monsieur Bovary's entire drama begins with the death of his first wife. This death is the fundamental factor, the necessary event which will enable the tragedy to be set in motion. Van Gogh sensed that perfectly; it is the elimination of the chance for a normal life, by an accident of destiny.

He too had always been refused this normal life: first with Kee through the fault of his intransigent, narrow-minded family; then with Sien and her mother, malevolent and beyond redemption; and now with Margot and her imbecilic family. Thus, well beyond the undeniable anecdotal parallel with a woman who collapsed upon hearing bad news, the novel was reflected in the painter's life at an essential level: the impossibility of a conventional existence, because of a perverse destiny. Moreover, in reading this novel, which caused a scandal in its time, and which overturned the convictions of those who believed it necessary to condemn every act they consider contrary to morality, it is clear that Van Gogh was continuing to search for – and find – an intellectual framework which was opposed on all points to that of the environment in which he grew up.

Using this logic of opposites, the classification of Pastor Van Gogh as a woman is the natural counterpart of Vincent's concept of virility. Van Gogh had always felt close to what he described as the 'virile', in painting and in literature. In this sense he placed himself alongside the creators, the sowers: those who have had an influence upon the natural destiny of things and bent them to their demands. The pastor was merely protecting what was in place: he embodies the conservative, prudent mind of what his century called a good housekeeper; he is fear, whereas Vincent is audacity.

At the same time, using another image, the painter confides to Theo that Margot Begemann is comparable to a violin crafted by an ancient master, which has been spoiled by incompetent restorers, but whose original quality can still be detected. This metaphor is a good illustration of the fascination Vincent had for the effects of age upon women. The remainder of the letter gives another example of this. He mentions a photograph of Kee Vos, taken one year after their abortive relationship, and declares that Kee seems to him more 'interesting' than before. Time has had a positive effect on her beauty, faithful to Michelet's idea, which states that 'there are no old women'. For Van Gogh, an obvious link existed between the Begemann and Vos affairs, which were characterized by a shared 'disturbing of the peace' [458]. In using the image of the master's violin which has been spoilt, the painter was basically saying that Begemann, who had a sickly sensibility, could, in different circumstances, have enjoyed a much more fulfilling destiny than the vegetative state in which she was maintained by a family convinced of her inability to live a 'normal' life. As for Kee Vos, she had been recently widowed when Vincent declared his love to her. This widowhood, this melancholy and this bereavement were also considered by Vincent as a form of repose. Now, according to him 'there's good in every energetic movement'. So disturbing the repose of these lethargic women was not reprehensible, contrary to what was thought by the 'theological people', who respected and venerated bereavement, and who thought that the awakening of a woman who was dulled by melancholy was worse than death. According to Van Gogh, it was normal for a woman to *hate* those who had dared to disturb her rest. But, he goes on to add, this woman will not *despise* the one who has awakened her as she despises men who, through respect for the repose of these slumbering women, have 'extinguished the manliness in themselves'. In the context of his own case, the 'theological people who have extinguished the manliness in themselves' pointed above all to Pastor Van Gogh. Van Gogh ends his passage devoted to disturbed women by whispering to Theo that Mouret – one of the protagonists in *Au bonheur des dames* – is right to call a man who stifles his virility 'dupe' and 'fool'.

Thus the continual drama of living together in Nuenen was entirely transformed into literature. Van Gogh's system of thought was unique: and his concept of the *vie artiste* saw him constantly acting and thinking in accordance with the

same pattern, whether in literature, painting, love, family relationships or the most down-to-earth daily matters. Vincent 'analyzed' his *real* environment, as he had seen Balzac, Hugo, Eliot and Zola 'analyze' fictional environments. When he wrote to his brother, he admitted that he 'sketched out' things in a rough, exaggerated manner. But he claimed that this was in order to bring out the truth more clearly. His comparison with a dog, for example, was necessary according to him so that Theo could understand the truth, for 'at bottom', he believed that his illustration was 'true'. What mattered was the 'feeling', and not the exactness of what was described. Did Michelet not say that 'the male is very wild'? Vincent remembered this phrase in the midst of the family storms; he was aware of being *wild*, and did not consider it desirable to betray his nature. But above all, he felt *male*, in other words 'virile', a quality he admired in his favourite artists and writers. His main criticism of his father was a lack of virility – to the point of femininity: instead of sowing, his father stifled the seeds, deprived them of light and nutrients. Vincent would oppose this with all his might.

The conflict with his father enabled him to come up with an 'ideal', which in the letter, written in Dutch, he formulated in French: 'bonne volonté d'être inoffensif, *certitude de résister* (willingness not to give offence, *confidence to resist*), that's my ideal, and I'm searching for that so far as is in me. But accepting everything, though, will be regretted later – so – one has to act.' [474]

The 'confidence to resist' and the *need* to act were central to his ideas, a fact which explains his attitude in relation to those around him, whose harmful influence he feared, believing it was liable to distance him from nature and virility. Moreover, he put Theo on his guard against his environment, Paris, whose decadent spirit could make him forget where he comes from. Thus distorted, Theo would no longer care about anything but money, which would imply that he would judge works according to their trading value, and not according to their artistic value, that is to say according to their ability to convey 'true feeling'. For all this, Vincent refused to argue with his younger brother. He explained to him calmly that, if he was planning to take their father's side, and if he continued to remonstrate with him about his behaviour in the family home, he would break off relations with him, for while he had to fight for his art, he would not do so with his brother. Faced with the threat of conflict, Theo would always prefer to display a conciliatory face.

The books that Vincent read in Nuenen transported him constantly to Paris. So-called Naturalist literature, by its very name, reconciled the painter of peasants that Van Gogh was with the city. Indeed, according to Van Gogh, nature was not limited to what was green, leafy or external to human activities; quite the contrary. The term 'nature' also applied to the suburbs of the large conurbations, or to the bottom of the mines in the north of France. 'Nature grasped at close quarters' was also *Sapho*, by Daudet,²⁰⁶ an urban fiction. Thus nature was not only what was

natural, but everything that aroused a human emotion and which could, consequently, be represented in a just, truly-*felt* way, by a skilful and honest artist. Van Gogh used the word 'nature', both in Dutch and in French, as it is used in 'nature morte' (still life). One may depict two glasses and a knife, items that are not very 'natural', without escaping from the definition. A work may therefore be exaggerated, unfinished, not respect local colour, and yet remain natural, because it is 'real'. This idea is perfectly compatible with the idea of the 'corner of nature seen through the temperament' spoken of by Zola, the *Naturalist*; nature provides the point of departure, the inspiration and the motif. The artist has free use of personal *craftsmanship* to convey his feelings before the thing depicted.

With only Theo and his books as companions for his thoughts, Van Gogh quickly urged his brother to become a Mouret of the art market. Octave Mouret, in *Au bonheur des dames*, proves to be a master of the manipulation and anticipation of feminine desires, whims and weaknesses. He is a model of success, a glittering example of social climbing. An adventurous man, sure of himself and self-satisfied; a business genius able to create needs where they did not exist. Vincent asked precisely this for his brother and his paintings, and saw Zola's novel as proof that stunning success was possible.

Van Gogh's letters show a world perceived through a fictional, idealizing, literary prism. They testify to a desire constantly to compare immobile fictions with changing realities. The categories which the painter uses to convey his actions and his thoughts (the Jesuits, the black ray, 'it', woman, the idle, the decadents, the *comme il faut*, the tulip merchants...) suggest that their author was not content merely to seek out a way of communicating with his brother by appealing to shared references; the fiction that Van Gogh wrote suggests rather that it was giving a faithful account of what he thought and felt. On his writing paper, Van Gogh reinvented his existence, proving intransigent with everything that risked rebelling against his creative stranglehold. Consequently, the factors that made most impression upon the painter were those of which he gave the best account. It is also these specific passages that constitute the key to reading Van Gogh's work. The painter's correspondence is not a reliable document for anyone interested in exact biographical details; it does not correspond to reality, but to the vision Van Gogh had of it. It is also for this reason that it is unwise to suggest that Van Gogh may have been influenced inordinately by books. The books served him, like so many arguments used to back up his own stories, told without dishonesty, but told, and not simply related. The painter's letters had the goal of transmitting information. The man who wrote them had chosen to live a *vie artiste*, virile, creative and idealized, and was neither a scientist nor a journalist. Together with his paintings, Van Gogh's correspondence is without doubt the document that best conveys the artistic *nature* of his *perception* of reality. This biased perception influenced what he read *a fortiori* and *a priori*, much more than his reading matter influenced his perception of what was real.

His father, a man of simple nature, did not perceive reality in an artistic way. His permanent disagreement with his son hung essentially on this difference in reading life, for basically, the two men seemed driven by the most laudable intentions – but became tangled up in generous but vain attempts to open each other's eyes to one another's realities. They did not take the same path, but undoubtedly were searching for the same paradise. Their difference of opinion came to a natural end with the death of the pastor, on 26 March 1885.

The painter of peasants

In a letter dating from May 1885, Van Gogh recalled two lines by Jules Breton, taken from a poem dedicated to Jean-François Millet, the painter of peasants par excellence.²⁰⁷

The peasant TWICE BROWNED
By the twilight and suntan. [500]²⁰⁸

Vincent had always liked rustic motifs. He was sensitive in particular to the works and examples of those who opened the way to him, Breton and Millet. Through its subject, this short quotation characterizes the relationship that Van Gogh maintained with the effects of colour and light as elements which could convey a sense above and beyond depiction. The dark brown hue of the peasant's face, which we can picture, bears witness to a life spent tilling the earth, working in the open air, accentuated, exaggerated by the dusk. Consequently, this hue alone has a more important narrative value than the most precise drawing.

A few days later, Vincent addressed a few remarks to Theo concerning an article written by Paul Mantz – the same Paul Mantz who had edited and published *La vie et l'œuvre de Jean-François Millet*, one of Van Gogh's bedside books, which he had at first borrowed and a copy of which he had just been given as a present. Vincent emphasizes the author's virile language, his grand 'vision', his recognition of Millet as a 'light' of the century, and the fact that he expects that a new light will appear in art. Up to this point, Mantz and Van Gogh are in perfect agreement. However, their opinions diverge regarding the work of one painter, Alfred Roll. Sensitive to proletarian realities, Roll was stifled by the Second Empire before being adulated under the Third Republic. Alfred Roll had just exhibited a canvas, at the 1884 Salon, depicting *Marianne Offrey, vegetable seller* (ill. 13). This canvas pays homage to those women who walked the Parisian streets, basket in hand, in search of a few buyers for their vegetables. As far as Van Gogh was concerned, Roll, who had provoked a small scandal with his *Miners' strike*, which the State had acquired without daring to exhibit it, was entirely worthy of praise and respect,

contrary to what was said by Paul Mantz, who had classified him as a 'beginner'. In particular, Mantz criticizes Roll for being incapable of calling attention to the hard toil of workers in towns. Van Gogh defends Roll, explaining that work in towns is different from work in the fields. According to Vincent, workers in towns suffer from a lack of air, health and sobriety, which explains why they have a distorted relationship to work: Roll has merely painted the workers as they are.²⁰⁹

Van Gogh retained all his freedom of judgement, allowing himself to have a fundamental disagreement with a man he admired, just as he had registered his disagreement with Zola regarding Millet. Next, the painter shows exactly the same respect for urban, industrial and rustic motifs. He criticizes Mantz for being incapable of understanding the essential difference there may be in the way one paints the same motif, in this case work, according to how much fulfilment the



13. Alfred Roll, *Marianne Offrey, crieuse de vert*, c. 1884, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Pau

social and geographical situation allows the worker. Here, the town is not favourable to work, since it is an obstacle to the sobriety needed to carry out that work. Applied to himself, this fundamental trait is extremely important. In order to work, this painter in his workman's garb fled from the influence of the large conurbations, certain that they were having a bad influence on his creativity. As regards his own career, he aspires to remain in the country, to paint peasants as Jean-François Millet did. All the same, he does not allow himself to condemn those who paint industrial or urban motifs, recognizing that certain bodies and certain temperaments could blossom in the city, and takes account of the fact that the influence of the city itself is found as much in the execution of the canvas as in the scenes depicted. This lucidity about his own position, as well as that of his peers, testifies both to his open-mindedness and his self-assurance as an artist, since he had no hesitation in having a virtual confrontation with Paul Mantz, whom he admired, just as he had confronted Zola when the author ventured to talk about painting. A conscientious peasant painter, Van Gogh knew his field and his plough.

Vincent continues his letter by asking Theo if he can please send him Zola's *Germinal*, which has just come out, and which he cannot wait to read. He adds a vital remark in the post-script: 'Although – out of touch – although out of the art world for a long time – turned out – because of my clogs &c. – yet I see from that article by Mantz that there are still connoisseurs and art lovers, even now, who – *know something* – and that is what Thoré, what Théophile Gautier knew. And that, leaving aside the self-styled more civilized world of progress for what it is, *namely a deception*, it continues to come down to what the reformers already announced about taste in '48, for instance, in a manly and forceful way.' [502]

According to certain authors, the revolution of 1848 was the first proletarian revolution. For Van Gogh, revolutions had always been the subject of a fascination tinged with nostalgia. Doubtless he felt he was a revolutionary in his soul, even if he had never formulated a real political opinion. He loved revolution and the revolutionary eras for what they were, and not for what they changed. He loved the commitment, the creative – and therefore 'virile' – effervescence, and the strong ideas. The revolutionary culture so admired by Van Gogh was necessarily simple and spontaneous, since it served ideas that required the support of the majority if they were to succeed. Van Gogh was extremely sensitive to this propaganda swollen with hope, which idealized the present by exaggerating it, and which promised a better tomorrow, with greater justice for the poor and the oppressed. In Nuenen, the artist himself felt poor, oppressed, isolated and rejected. Incapable of contemplating changes in himself, unsuited for civilized society as a 'natural' man, he dreamed vaguely of a better world, in the sense in which he might have a recognized place in it. All the same, he did not advocate the overthrow of the established order through conflict, and was content with the idea of

the possibility of this overthrow, constantly waving the spectre of the excesses of 1793 to avoid the shift to action; however, he allowed himself to think nostalgically about revolutions he had not known, which he reconstructed through fictional accounts such as *Les misérables* or *The tale of two cities*, or with the aid of history books whose objectivity left something to be desired, such as Michelet's *Histoire de France*. The 'something' that Thoré and Gautier 'knew' was in fact an acute awareness of the need for a socialist revolution. Théophile Thoré, art critic and journalist, had played a not inconsiderable part in the 1848 revolution. His commitment and the stance he took had forced him into exile with the coming to power of Napoléon III, 'little Bonaparte', obliging him to publish his articles under the pseudonym of William Bürger – 'Bürger' being a translation of 'citizen'. With Michelet, Thoré was one of the authors who made the strongest impression upon Van Gogh. The affinity of ideas between the critic and the painter were numerous: it is sufficient to read any article by Thoré to realize that the two men were absolutely on the same wavelength. In the first lines of the article 'Van der Meer de Delft', published in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1866, Thoré cites the *View of Delft* by Vermeer, the *Portrait of Burgomaster Six*, and *The anatomy lesson* by Rembrandt, canvases which made a strong impression upon Van Gogh. More significantly, in dedicating his article to Champfleury, Thoré classified Vermeer as a 'sphinx', a classification with which Van Gogh would totally agree, and which he mentioned several times in his letters. 'I dedicate my sphinx to you. You will recognize it as an ancestor of the lovers of Nature, who understand it and express it in its alluring sincerity.'²¹⁰

We must remember that Vermeer was not known for his studies of nature in the sense that is most widely understood today. Thoré used the word 'nature' as Van Gogh did, quite simply to designate the reality that surrounded him. Can the *View of Delft* be considered a work on *Nature*? According to Van Gogh and Thoré, it can and should, in contrast to studio works. For Van Gogh, this was the definition of the word nature: it is that which is not artificial. The misunderstanding that prevails today about the semantic value of the word 'nature' in Van Gogh is echoed in the translation of '*nature morte*', or 'still life' in English, and '*stilleven*' in Dutch. A 'still life' is not the same thing as 'dead nature'. For Van Gogh, the term '*nature morte*' actually seems totally contradictory: nature cannot in any case be dead, it is everywhere alive. It is life which defines nature. Whether the painter paints in a café in the centre of town or in a field, it is '*sur nature*', '*dans la nature*', even when he is leaning his back against a factory and painting a train as it passes over a bridge.

It was also in Thoré's work, when the critic wrote in an article devoted to Hobbema about 'the mysterious and intimate feeling of nature',²¹¹ that Van Gogh first encountered a fundamental idea which he would later take up. The notion of feeling was not, for Thoré, an effect produced upon the spectator, but a basic

constituent of *execution* and *production*. This term may also give rise to regrettable confusion. When Van Gogh states that a painting has ‘feeling’, it is because it is ‘truly felt’, that is to say, it effectively transmits an emotional charge, independent of the subject depicted, and one that hinges solely upon the way in which the thing is depicted. Thus, any representation can transmit the ‘painfully intimate’ so dear to Van Gogh, even if it depicts a cabbage and two potatoes.

Finally, it was in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* that Van Gogh could have read, for example:

The goal of art is beauty and not ideas. But, through beauty, it must make us love what is real, what is just, what is fertile for the development of man. [...] A portrait, a landscape, a family scene may have this result just as much as an heroic or allegorical image. Everything that expresses, in a well felt form, a profound character of man or nature encloses some of that ideal, since it makes us reflect upon the essential points of life.²¹²

If we add to these considerations the fact that for Charles Blanc, in his *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, which was published in the same *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* as Thoré, ‘Yes, touch is the handwriting of the painter, it is the mark of his spirit’,²¹³ then add in Bacon’s aphorism, ‘Art is man added to nature’, we have all the ingredients to be absolutely certain that Zola’s ideas about art did not play a major part in Van Gogh’s work. Zola and Van Gogh had sources in common, but Van Gogh’s art owes much more to the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* than to *Mes haines*.

If we take as a starting point a man who has no other place to go, who feels intimately linked to the Brabant countryside, and who wishes, in seeking simplicity and sincerity, to use his personal traumas to create an authentic, well-felt art, Vincent’s choice to stay in Nuenen to paint peasants and weavers, while remaining faithful to the revolutionary spirit, becomes perfectly consistent.

In The Hague, in 1883, Van Gogh wrote of his relationship with the prostitute Clasina Hoornik before declaring:

Have got round to reading the last part of *Les misérables* – the figure of Fantine – a prostitute – made a deep impression on me – oh, I know as well as anyone that in reality one won’t find an exact Fantine – but all the same this character by Hugo – like all his characters for that matter – is true, being the essence of what one sees in reality. It is the type – of which one encounters only individuals. [336]

Van Gogh, who had set himself the mission of depicting *types* of peasants and weavers, would find in Nuenen all the material a painter of peasants could dream of, culminating in his masterly composition, *The potato eaters* (F 1661 JH 737),

which shows typical figures seated at a table in a characteristic situation, and whose meaning is as much about what it depicts as the way in which it is depicted; in the words of Sensier's book, it is painted with 'the same earth in which they sow'.

One remarkable literary watershed is the fact that, the moment he reaches Nuenen, Van Gogh abandoned his reading of Erckmann-Chatrian. It must be admitted that the work of the duo from Alsace does not best reflect Vincent's aesthetic and moral interests. The novels of Erckmann-Chatrian are undoubtedly too idealized, not close enough to a tangible or applicable reality. They fail to defend any well defined moral cause, accept the status quo without wanting to change it, and perhaps, in Van Gogh's mind, lack that conscience which ought to govern reason, the 'ray from on high'. Moreover, the Alsatian countryside described in *L'ami Fritz*, for example, a land of milk and honey filled with good humour, traditional costumes and meals with lots of wine, must have seemed very unreal in the eyes of Van Gogh, who met no-one but muddy peasants living on watery potatoes and coffee. Nevertheless, his programme of reading contained a succession of modern realist titles, confirming that Van Gogh was continuing to follow current literary developments as closely as possible: *L'évangéliste* (1883), *Nuna Roumestan* (1881), *Sapho* (1884) and *Les rois en exil* (1879) by Daudet; *Germinal* (1885) and *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875) by Zola; and *Chérie* (1884) by the Goncourts.

8

Paris²¹⁴

Antwerp

At the end of November 1885, Vincent decided to flee from the difficulties he faced every day in Nuenen. He had difficulty in finding models, as the parish priest had forbidden his flock to pose for him following an unpleasant event. A woman, who had been spending time with him, became pregnant, and the painter was wrongly accused of being responsible for her condition. Van Gogh felt totally distant from the stir caused by his presence and his activities, but he had to conclude that Nuenen offered him few prospects for development. Having lost his principal opponent – his father – and his only friend, Van Rappard – who had criticized him harshly for his painting of the *Potato eaters* – there was nothing now to keep him in the Netherlands.

Before we take a closer look at what Van Gogh read in Antwerp during the winter of 1885-86, one painting which has attracted many comments, *Still life with Bible* (ill. 14), deserves consideration. For while the attention that has been directed at this painting highlights its dramatic importance – the painting can be seen as a modern *vanitas* (irrespective of any knowledge Van Gogh may have had of the Dutch *vanitas* tradition) painted shortly after his father's death, depicting the relationship between the pastor and his eldest child – it seems that some of the interpretations that have been put forward up to now suffer from a lack of knowledge, as Sund has already pointed out,²¹⁵ about the content of the novel that features in the foreground, Emile Zola's *La joie de vivre*. Thus, Hulsker states that he wonders if this title, which might be programmatic, might have left a bitter taste in Vincent's mouth, for up to that point the artist had not had many reasons to rejoice in his existence. Hulsker shows by this very statement that he has not read the novel depicted in what he calls 'the most important still life of the Nuenen years'.²¹⁶ Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop's interpretation seems closer to Van Gogh's reality.²¹⁷ As the authors mention, nothing proves that Van Gogh chose *La joie de vivre* for any other reason than having it at his disposal. Furthermore, the highlighted chapter (Isaiah 53) that has traditionally been seen as an announcement



14. Vincent van Gogh, *Still life with Bible*, 1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam;
F 117 JH 946

of Christ's Coming, could be an indication that Van Gogh simply wanted to testify to his admiration of Christ. Joan Greer compares the two main characters of Isaiah 53 (Christ) and *La joie de vivre* (Pauline Quenu), and demonstrates how Van Gogh may have identified with both figures, as he probably saw Pauline Quenu as a modern Christlike figure.²¹⁸

Undoubtedly, the title *La joie de vivre* is ironic. Erickson, who spends her book attempting to prove that Van Gogh always remained a good Christian, demonstrates with the aid of anachronisms that this still life is proof of a reconciliation between faith and modern literature.²¹⁹ Sund, who delivers the most precise and best-informed analysis, offers a very open interpretation: Van Gogh may have identified with one or other character in Zola's novel, and must have found similarities between the situations described in *La joie de vivre* and those he had experienced in the family home at Nuenen.

As Sund remarks, *La joie de vivre* is in no respects a hymn to life, to be contrasted with the sad reality of narrow-minded pastors. However, at the moment when Van Gogh composed this still life, he considered that 'the God of the pastors is dead'; moreover, his father had died a few months earlier. That father, with whom Van Gogh maintained a relationship consisting of incessant conflicts, regarded contemporary French literature merely as a way of subsiding into alcoholism and decline. According to Van Uiter, Van Heugten and Van Tilborgh, this opposition is immortalized in *Still life with Bible*, the critical testimony of a son who has rebelled against his father.²²⁰

Looking beyond art historians' debates about the interpretation of this partially literary subject, we may be permitted simply to see this painting as a statement of humility before that which is eternal and that which passes. Zola and the Bible are mere vanity, dust that will return to dust. What really matters is elsewhere. There is indeed opposition, but perhaps not between these two elements of the painting; it exists also between the temporal and the non-temporal, and the vanity of coming into conflict over ideological details. In this sense, this painting could represent a posthumous reconciliation, a proof of affection and filial piety.

The action described in *La joie de vivre* is an infernal spiral, which gradually tightens around its principal character, Pauline Quenu, as the narrative progresses. Van Gogh did not identify with this character, who is alarmingly naïve, nor with that of Lazare, a complete failure. By including this novel in a *vanitas*, Van Gogh did not appropriate its content or its modernity; quite the contrary. He distanced himself in relation to everything that was familial and stifling, ossified by prejudices and dishonesty. Van Gogh's intention was to go beyond the narrow framework of the Bible and the family: he would neither be a Pauline, nor a Lazare, nor a priest; what he intended to leave behind him 'can't be meant for the worms' [288], contrary to what is depicted in Zola's novel (family intrigues) and in the Bible (religion).

This canvas therefore may represent a break and a renewal. Van Gogh planned to have a change of air, to get away from the stifling atmosphere in Nuenen. And a few weeks after composing his *Still life with Bible*, he left his native Brabant once and for all. *Still life with Bible* is both a testament and a sign that Van Gogh is taking flight: the Bible and Zola's book complement each other, are of equal worth, and one must know them. But at the end of the day, nothing will remain of them: they are merely human creations.

In Antwerp, Vincent found museums, an almost established art world with its dealers and its salons and its academy of fine arts, but also the working-class urban motifs whose literary equivalents he loved so much in Zola and Dickens. It is understandable that he did not want to return to The Hague, where his body and mind would have been assailed by acutely painful memories. Antwerp, a place he knew and which was close by, seemed a good choice to him, especially because he



15. Vincent van Gogh, *Oleanders*, 1888, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
 Gift of Mr and Mrs John L. Loeb, 1962; F 593 JH 1566.
 The novel on the table is Zola's *La joie de vivre*.

knew that he could meet other artists there, as well as being able to take classes to improve his technique.

He set up home in a small room and began the life of a painter without a teacher. He lived frugally, despaired of academic teaching, and encountered incomprehension where he had hoped to revel in fertile rivalry. He would remain barely three months in the capital of Flanders, but he did make a discovery that would drastically change his conception of art: *the Japanese style*.

Van Gogh and Japan is the story of a splendid misunderstanding. Although he was besotted with the writings of modern French novelists, the Japanese craze had not passed him by. By 1886 it was no longer really modern, but it was still the taste of the day. In the preface to *Chérie*, which came out in 1884, Edmond de Goncourt emphasized that this craze was initiated entirely by himself and his brother. This statement appears somewhat presumptuous, but it has to be conceded that the

Goncourts were the first to popularize the fashion and bring it out of the privileged high-society boudoirs of the Second Empire. Showing that he was well informed about this twenty-five-year-old fashion, Vincent, who still did not know what an Impressionist was, wrote: 'One of De Goncourt's sayings was "Japonaiserie for ever". Well, these docks are one huge Japonaiserie, fantastic, singular, strange – at least so one can see them. I'd like to walk with you there to find out whether we look at things the same way.' [545]

He mentioned in the same letter that he had pinned several Japanese pictures to the walls of his little room. This new passion, which distanced him considerably from the broad-bottomed peasant-women and birds' nests he painted in Nuenen, would have a dramatic effect on his palette. He described the port of Antwerp in light of his new discovery, in particular highlighting contrasts of colour and position, and producing a veritable relief map of the elements which, in his eyes, created the picturesque character of the place. This deliberate search for contraries that complement each other, which he associated with 'Japonaiserie', was of fundamental importance for Van Gogh's work: we find it again in his theoretical interests, when he discovered the ideas of Delacroix, and we see it applied in practically all of his work, in which there is a ceaseless interplay of oppositions and contrasts.

As Sund emphasizes very well, Van Gogh took his example from the Goncourts,²²¹ those two brothers who contributed so much to the artistic and literary development of their time. Van Gogh harboured similar ambitions even before he went to Paris: he was planning to set up a studio, but given what was objectively within his grasp, his idea that he and his brother could succeed in creating something comparable to the Goncourts seems incredibly naïve. He was still a nobody, did not yet know anyone, and nobody yet appreciated his talent.

It was in Antwerp that Van Gogh reads part of Zola's *L'œuvre*, which was serialized in *Gil Blas* and which he considered very real.²²² *L'œuvre* came just at the right moment, since Van Gogh had swiftly explored Antwerp and exhausted the possibilities offered by the town. Vincent's grand ambition is confirmed by his friend and pupil Anton Kerssemakers, of Eindhoven, whom he told that he would do everything in his power to ensure that he was remembered after his death.²²³ *L'œuvre* provides an example of an artist who does not succeed, and who ends up committing suicide in front of what should have been his masterpiece – and which instead would be nothing but the ruins of a castle built in the air. But *L'œuvre* also describes a world where ideas are exchanged; a world of collective effervescence, emulation and adventures, in defiance of bourgeois conventions and values. Thus, through Zola's prose, Van Gogh was able to follow the destiny of a failed painter, gifted with an undeniable talent, but nonetheless incapable of getting his bold paintings past the wall of idiotic mockery raised up by the public. The start of the novel, which Van Gogh read in Antwerp, contains pages which must have had a

considerable impact on his imagination, and which undoubtedly produced a degree of identification:

In Paris, hadn't the celebrated Berthou, the painter of 'Nero in the Circus' – Berthou, whose lessons he had attended for six long months – told him a score of times that he would never be able to do anything? How he now regretted those six months wasted in idiotic efforts, absurd 'studies,' under the iron rule of a man whose ideas differed so much from his own. [...]

Was there aught else in art than the rendering of what one felt within oneself? Was not the whole of art reduced to placing a woman in front of one – and then portraying her according to the feelings she inspired? Was not a bunch of carrots – yes, a bunch of carrots – studied from nature, and painted unaffectedly, in a personal style, worth all the everlasting smudges of the School of Arts, all that tobacco-juice painting, cooked up according to certain given recipes? The day would come when one carrot, originally rendered, would lead to a revolution.²²⁴

These ideas are in perfect accord with Vincent's personal beliefs and experience. When he started out as an artist, he spent time in Mauve's studio, copying plaster figures which he ended up shattering in a fit of temper. His relations with his masters at the Academy of Fine Arts, MM. Verlat and Siberdt, soon took a turn comparable to the silent cries of rage uttered by Claude Lantier, the unfortunate artist depicted in *L'œuvre*.²²⁵

Zola described Claude Lantier as a man perpetually caught up in a fever of creativity and work, and always dissatisfied with the results. Like Van Gogh, however, he is convinced that he is on a better path than the others, confident of his own talent, and certain of the others' stupidity. 'In his rare moments of content he felt proud of those few studies, the only ones which satisfied him, which, as it were, foretold a great painter, admirably gifted, but hampered by sudden and inexplicable fits of impotency.'²²⁶

Van Gogh shared several character traits with Zola's Claude Lantier: his rages, his irreverent restlessness, his unreserved respect for painters whose work he did not actually like, and the conviction that the only painter of the Romantic era who merited a second glance was Delacroix.

Dealing sabre-like strokes at the velveteen jacket, he continued lashing himself into excitement with his uncompromising theories which respected nobody:

They are all so many daubers of penny prints, who have stolen their reputations; a set of idiots or knaves on their knees before public imbecility! Not one among them dares to give the philistines a slap in the face. And while we are about it, you know that old Ingres turns me sick with his glairy painting.

Nevertheless, he's a brick, and a plucky fellow, and I take off my hat to him, for he did not care a curse for anybody, and he used to draw like the very devil. He ended by making the idiots, who nowadays believe they understand him, swallow that drawing of his. After him there are only two worth speaking of, Delacroix and Courbet. The others are only numskulls.²²⁷

This passage is revealing about what Van Gogh and Lantier have in common. We know that Zola had an imperious need to create something real, meticulously researched, and to offer his readers a faithful image of a possible reality. With his Lantier, he came astonishingly close to Van Gogh, whose supposed originality crumbled away in contact with the clichés of the Second Empire: Van Gogh was a real, possible artist, fitting in well with the *nature* of the Parisian artistic world. What is more, Montmartre harboured dozens and dozens of young artists, all newly arrived and all – like Van Gogh – impatient for success. Of course, unlike Vincent, Lantier did not have a brother like Theo van Gogh, the art dealer, living right in the heart of the city ...

The language used by Lantier also corresponds closely with that used by Van Gogh in the letters he writes in French: 'a brick', 'plucky', 'like the devil', 'old Ingres', all these terms are found more or less identically in the correspondence penned by Vincent, who used similar turns of phrase in comparable situations. He had a good command of French, but his stay in Paris taught him what he still lacked: the jargon and style of the artist's studio, fine examples of which are provided by Zola in *L'œuvre*.

Nevertheless, identification with the protagonist of *L'œuvre* has its limits, for Van Gogh was well aware that Claude Lantier represented a first-generation Impressionist painter, in an era dominated by the over-cautious, frightened bourgeoisie of the Second Empire. Lantier is a misunderstood pioneer within a society still traumatized by three successive revolutions. The Second Empire had come to an end on the sad final note of the defeat at Sedan and the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. Exiled, Victor Hugo had constantly mocked the Emperor, whom he called 'little Napoléon'. Zola, with his Rougon-Macquarts, drew up an inventory of the perverse effects and pettiness of this corrupt, insipid society, which saw money become all-powerful. For Van Gogh, who was an admirer of Delacroix, the politically committed painter of the 1848 revolution, the Third Republic was not much more thrilling than the Second Empire. It was difficult to proclaim something that was strong, just, committed and virile, as Delacroix had been able to do, in this society characterized by disillusionment, political struggles and the fear of change. The most recent historical act that might have some importance in the eyes of the younger generations, greedy for renewal and social justice, was the Paris Commune, a tragic, bloody and traumatizing episode, which took away Parisians' taste for public rebellion for a long time.

Van Gogh, whose historical awareness was essentially derived from reading the biased works of Michelet, Erckmann-Chatrian and Victor Hugo, was a great lover of revolutionary movements. The talented Claude Lantier, in *Le ventre de Paris*, is a sixteen-year-old revolutionary, cautious and sceptical, in rebellion against the bourgeoisie and the state, but without any well-defined political plan. This is exactly what characterized Van Gogh, who was always critical, without ever taking sides in any political movement: an admirer of revolutions, but with little desire to participate in them except by means of his brush.

In *L'œuvre*, Lantier's frustration is twofold: he has no admirers, and what is more, he has no enemies; an emasculating situation for the revolutionary artist he can feel bubbling up within him. He is ignored; at best, people laugh at him. It was the same for Van Gogh in Antwerp, as it was towards the end of his stay in Nuenen. His drawings were greeted with mistrustful incomprehension, smugness and mocking rejection. Siberdt, his drawing teacher at the academy in Antwerp, has the same narrow-minded certainties as the public who mocked the paintings of Claude Lantier. Like Lantier, Vincent demanded the right to draw *real*, natural women, and not asexual bodies fixed in artificial poses. At the time he left Antwerp, Van Gogh did not know the tragic ending of Zola's novel. And the example of the Goncourts, according to the preface to *Chérie*, reassured him about his chances of success. After spending a little more than three months in Belgium, and having exhausted the potential of the city, its museums and its pettiness, Van Gogh suddenly decided to go to Paris, without warning his brother in advance.

Paris

In March 1886, Theo received a hastily scribbled note, in charcoal, signed by Vincent, who had just arrived in Paris. All Theo had to do was hurry over to the Salle Carré in the Louvre, and fetch him. That same day, the painter moved in with the dealer. Once reunited the brothers soon moved house, as Vincent and his painting took up too much room.

In Nuenen, when Van Gogh alerted his brother to the dangers of Paris and to the risk of becoming a mediocrity, he explained to him that he was in the process of turning into a Bourdoncle, when he ought to be an Octave Mouret. In Zola's *Au bonheur de dames*, Bourdoncle is the man with no woman, no imagination, rigid and conservative, unlike Mouret, who is the seducer, the man of inventions, innovations and progress. Theo, a model employee of Boussod, Valladon & Co., whose career was advancing well, had been unwise enough to rejoice in his good results in business. As early as 1884, Vincent sensed that his brother might play an important role in the art trade – not by offering paintings which already had admirers, but by creating new outlets for a new kind of art. For Van Gogh, whose

vocation was precisely to create this 'new' art, this situation offered interesting prospects. Mouret's example showed him, moreover, that success was entirely possible in Paris.

In 1885, Paris was the centre of French literary life. The 'modern literature' that Van Gogh enjoyed so much often used the city of Paris as its subject or setting: Dickens's *The tale of two cities*, Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* and *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Balzac's *Le père Goriot*, Zola's *Le ventre de Paris*, *Au bonheur des dames* and *Pot-bouille*, and Souvestre's *Un philosophe sous les toits*, to name but a few, all take place in Paris. In Sensier's book on Millet, the city of Paris also plays a major role, if only because Millet detests it. One literary subject that Van Gogh was particularly fond of, the 1789 Revolution, occurred principally in the city of Paris. Inevitably, reading these books influenced the image Van Gogh developed of the French capital.

Seen through these works, Paris resembles an immense human hive, where all possible destinies and events meet up and become entangled. It is a city of extremes: its recent history, composed of revolutions and instability, is bloody and passionate; a Rastignac, a Bel-Ami or a Mouret may come there in search of success, just as a Claude Lantier may die there, ignored, and a Jean-François Millet may flee from it, sickened by the prevailing intrigues and nepotism. In all levels of the population and at all levels of decision-making, any event is liable to come along and shake up people's lives. Paris is, par excellence, the place where people come from far away, to vanish or to shine.

So, in 1886, Vincent charged headlong into a world he thought he knew, having read about it and lived there in 1875. But what a change of perspective! At that time he had spent his time in churches and temples and read his Bible out loud every evening to his poor friend Gladwell; now he had returned with an artist's perspective, eager to sketch the entire frenzy seething before him at a single stroke.

One remarkable book, whose principal failing is undoubtedly that it was written in French, by a writer who claimed to be an eye-witness, Gustave Coquiot, has met with almost complete silence from Vincent's principal biographers. Hulsker merely shows contempt for it, Sund mentions it in her bibliography but does not use it in her text, and Kōdera does not mention it at all. However, the work contains a mine of precious information for anyone interested in the Montmartre into which Vincent plunged with so much impatience and desire, and from which he would emerge 'very upset and almost ill and almost an alcoholic as a result of overdoing it' [694]. This information is all the more precious since Coquiot was himself in Montmartre in 1886-88, was involved in Montmartre's night life, and says that he met Van Gogh there. The facts related by Coquiot must however be taken with a pinch of salt, as they are not all consistent with a plausible reality. For example *Le Hanne-ton*, which he describes, was not open during the painter's

lifetime. In view of this, the fact of his meeting with Van Gogh is uncertain. But Coquiôt's imagination and errors do not discredit his work any more than the other writings about Van Gogh's time in Paris; the descriptions of the atmosphere and environment are gripping and extremely valuable, and it would be a pity to have to manage without them on the grounds that his text is not scrupulously correct.

We learn, for example, that Van Gogh went to the *Perroquet Gris*, a brothel set up in 1860 by Bibi Malard, known as the father of whores, and bought in 1880 by Gabriel Hominal, known as Vermicelle.²²⁸ Quite apart from the facts, whether correct or not, there is a great poetic and metaphorical charge in these names, which we should note if we want to gain a valuable impression of the world in which the painter developed. Elsewhere, we find juicy descriptions of establishments like *Le Père Boivin*, *Le Rat Mort*, or '*La Nouvelle Athènes*, Place Pigalle. Le café des indépendants. Where you could see Manet, Degas, Renoir and the critics Duranty and Castagnary; at apéritif time they hurried there with their broad-brimmed hats, Lavallière cravats and heavy walking sticks. People there booed the Institut, and abhorred official art, which held court at the *Café de la Rochefoucauld*, in the street of the same name; a dismal café which boasted Cormon, Gervex and



16. Vincent van Gogh, *View of Paris from Montmartre*, 1886, Kunstmuseum, Basel;
F 262 JH 1102

M. Gérôme.²²⁹ There was also *La Truie qui File*, whose 'basement concealed a picturesque filth which enchanted Parisians'. *Au Hanne-ton* was 'a riotous market for lesbians and young pederasts'. 'Artistic cabarets were on parade everywhere, in Montmartre'.²³⁰

These spicy details are priceless for anyone interested in Vincent's intellectual and artistic development. How far he had come from the religious inspiration of his twenties! Steeped in a life of wild living and debauchery, simmering in artistic fever, surrounded by tens, hundreds of men like him, Van Gogh was at last no longer alone; of all the people he spent time with, and all the writers he admired, not a single one was born in Paris. All were, like him, drawn to Paris like moths to a flame. And many of them had had their wings burned: alcohol, hunger, the brothels, venereal diseases, opium ... There were more reasons to die than to live in Montmartre, and it was rare that anyone managed to follow the path he had set himself when he arrived. When the Parisians themselves came to Montmartre they had the impression that they were leaving Paris: it was a world apart, neither town nor country nor suburb. A world where one could be anonymous while being different: a total liberation for all those who, like Van Gogh, had just left an oppressive setting like Nuenen.

If Vincent still retained a touch of innocence, which we may doubt after the times he had spent in London, The Hague and Antwerp, where he had already consumed a few forbidden fruits, it is certain that Paris took away the last of his naivety, once and for all. At the same time, the sentimentality of Victorian literature, such as the works of the Brontë sisters and George Eliot, the moralizing lessons of Michelet, Souvestre and Karr, as well as the works of Balzac, Erckmann-Chatrian, Flaubert and even Zola, now belonged to the past. Zola, however, was still publishing books. But at the heart of Montmartre's artistic avant-garde, it seemed unlikely that the leading light of Naturalism had any kind of reputation for modernity.

Despite Coquiot's book, as well as the remarkable work done by Welsh-Ovcharov and Rewald,²³¹ we have few details about the two years Vincent spent in Paris. His intimate thoughts, his deep convictions, so carefully noted down in his letters to Theo, are totally absent: since he lived with his brother, he no longer wrote to him. Consequently, if we want to have an idea of what he was reading, we must refer to the letters he wrote later on, once he was settled in Arles. What is certain is that Van Gogh read enormously in Paris, and that he left Paris to avoid succumbing to the lures of wild living and alcohol as much as to discover a new light, which according to him would be linked to that of Japan.²³² Two paintings, *Romans parisiens* (ill. 20) and *Still life with a statuette* (ill. 22), testify to the intensity of his reading programme.

Romans parisiens

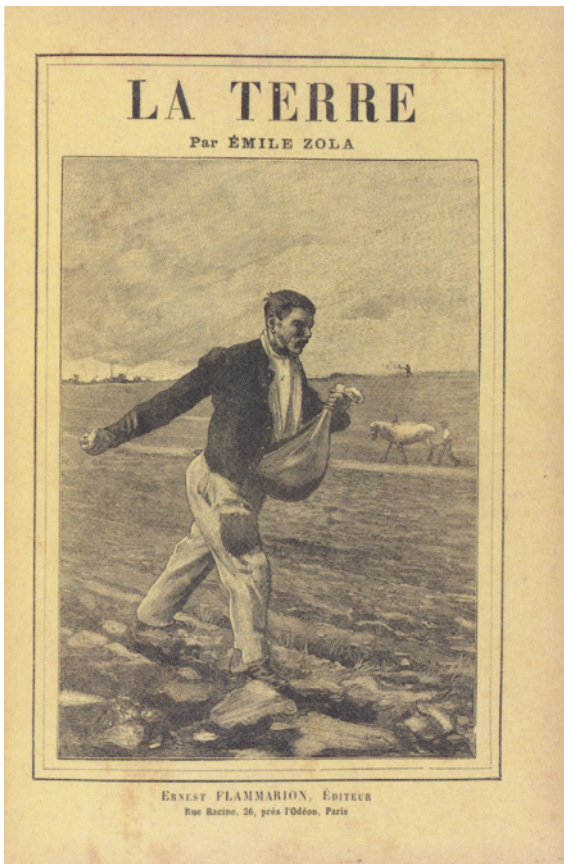
Sund devotes an entire chapter to the question as to whether Van Gogh read in Paris. In particular, this chapter highlights Van Gogh's resistance to 'the symbolist offensive'. It is true that in 1886 Impressionism and Naturalism were in a state of upheaval. Moréas published his symbolist 'Manifesto' in the *Figaro Littéraire* in September 1886,²³³ and in August of the following year, *Le Figaro* published the 'Manifeste des Cinq'. Written by five self-proclaimed disciples of Zola, this article is an all-out attack on *La terre*, the fifteenth volume of the Rougon-Macquart series. Zola replied, with great condescension, that he barely knew the signatories – though they claimed to be his emancipated disciples.

It is impossible to know what Van Gogh thought of all this upheaval surrounding the place, the function and the nature of literature. The really significant thing is that there is no evidence that Vincent had any interest in the more innovative developments in literature. Once we realize that he quoted neither *A rebours* (1884), by J.K. Huysmans, a truly revolutionary stepping-stone in the lake of Naturalism, nor Verlaine, Rimbaud or Mallarmé, we can fully understand that Van Gogh was not interested in literature as such, nor in the aesthetic, philosophical or moral problems it raised. Van Gogh had no taste for the unusual word, the learned construction or the harmonious sentence. Literary form mattered little to him, even if Mallarmé's poetry or Huysmans' prose ought, through their form, to appear less *real* to him than Zola's simpler, more direct prose. What mattered above all to Vincent was that literature belonged to him. It must be functional: back him up in his opinions, perhaps provide him with a spicy anecdote, a moving experience ... In short, it must entertain and reassure him. He expected from literature what he asked of pictures: feeling and consolation. To judge from his correspondence from Arles, his tastes were not transformed by contact with literary discoveries but became more refined: the painter remained attached to the key values of simplicity and work, in search of the *effet vrai*, through the exaggeration and simplification of reality. Mallarmé and Huysmans are a long way from these principles.

Van Gogh did not dislike *La terre*, a grotesque and controversial reduction of the peasant world to an unhealthy microcosm dominated by fear, hatred, avarice and jealousy (ill. 17). Quite the opposite, in fact; the procedure used by Zola perfectly matched his idea of how it was possible to depict the realities of peasant life. Thus, in Arles, when Vincent has just mentioned his latest canvas (11 August 1888), the *Portrait of Patience Escalier* (F 443 JH 1548), 'an old Camargue oxherd', he wrote: 'Ah, my dear brother – and the good folk will see only caricature in this exaggeration. But what does that do to us, we've read *La terre* and *Germinal*, and if we paint a peasant we'd like to show that this reading has in some way become part of us.' [663]

Sund uses the last part of this quotation, amputating ‘But what does that do to us’, and adding a capital letter to the ‘We’ that follows, as if the sentence began there, to state that the controversy stirred up by *La terre* had not diminished Van Gogh’s belief in the rightness and art of Zola’s descriptions of peasants. In addition, the translation used by Sund transforms the conditional tense of ‘we’d like’ into a present indicative, ‘we want’, which changes the meaning of the sentence.²³⁴

La terre was recognized by Van Gogh as a caricature, which says a lot about the way he read Zola. Zola aimed for authenticity, through intensive research, and by the use of scientific, experimental methods. Van Gogh, a great admirer of Daumier, saw only fertile exaggerations – to which he subscribed unreservedly. To Van Gogh, the ‘rightness’ mentioned by Sund was totally secondary, even undesirable. What mattered was *real feeling*, the right *impression*, provoked by artificial and exaggerated elements.



17. Cover of Emile Zola, *La terre*, illustrated edition published by Flammarion, 1889



18. Vincent van Gogh, *Three books*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; F 335 JH 1226.
The book on top is *Braves gens* (1886) by Jean Richepin

Van Gogh shared this taste for caricature and simplification with Alphonse Daudet, whose realist works, such as *Fromont jeune et Risler aîné*, or *L'évangéliste*, he had read prior to settling in Paris. The works by Daudet which Vincent discovered in Paris, such as *Tartarin de Tarascon* and *Les lettres de mon moulin*, are not realist at all: quite the opposite. They are lightweight books, filled with fancy, whose obvious goal is entertainment. This fact does not prevent Sund from including them in the section 'A naturalist loyalist against the tide' of her chapter 'Romans Parisiens'.²³⁵ But it is obvious that these works abandon the naturalist framework completely and cannot in any way support the idea that Van Gogh was a naturalist. On the contrary, this shows that, after contact with the literature he encountered in Paris Van Gogh moved on to something else.

Alphonse Daudet certainly illustrates the development of Van Gogh's literary tastes more effectively than Zola. Sund picks up the fact that the subtitle of Richepin's *Braves gens* (ill. 18) is 'Roman parisien', and that the destiny of its principal characters resembles that of Van Gogh: Tombre, an alcoholic who is sinking into the dregs of Parisian artistic life, is contrasted with the character of Yves, who

exiles himself to Brittany, where a healthier life enables him to do justice to his talent, developing it to its full extent. Van Gogh, who spoke of feeling that he had almost lapsed into alcoholism in Paris, and said that his departure for Arles saved his painting and made his lifestyle healthier, was certainly capable of seeing *Braves gens* as a warning and a model. Nevertheless, the example of Daudet's life and work loomed large in Van Gogh's thoughts regarding his departure and his destination. The subtitle of *Braves gens*, 'Roman parisien', has no particular value: *Sapho*, *Nuna Roumestan* and *Fromont jeune et Risler aîné* all have 'Mœurs parisiennes' as their subtitle. *Le Nabab*'s subtitle is 'Roman de mœurs parisiennes', while the subtitle of *Les rois en exil* and *L'évangéliste* is 'Roman parisien'. Consequently, it appears that the term 'Roman parisien' should be regarded as a mere indication, almost a literary genre, defining the location where the action takes place. Consequently, there is no privileged relationship between Richepin's subtitle and the title of Van Gogh's painting. On the other hand, we may suspect that a privileged relationship does exist between Daudet's writings and Van Gogh's chosen destination when we read in Daudet's *Souvenirs d'un homme de lettres*, published in 1888:

In a tiny green note-book [...] now lying before me, I have, under the generic title of *The South*, made, during years and years, a complete summary of the country of my birth, its climate, customs, temperament; its accents, gestures, frenzies and ebullitions caused by our sun, and the ingenuous tendency to lie, which proceeds from an excess of imagination, from an exuberant folly, gossiping and good-natured; so totally different from the cold, perverse, calculating lie met with in the North. [...]

Everything is put down [...] even to the moans over our illnesses, most of them nervous and rheumatic, bred by the skies full of wind and flame that consume the very marrow, reducing the whole being to a pulp, like sugar-cane, all of which are increased and exaggerated by vivid imagination; all are noted down; even the crimes of the South, the explosions of passion, of drunken violence, drunkenness begotten without drink, perplexing and scaring the conscience of the judges, brought thither from a different clime, who are bewildered in the midst of these exaggerations, these incredible testimonies they cannot classify.²³⁶

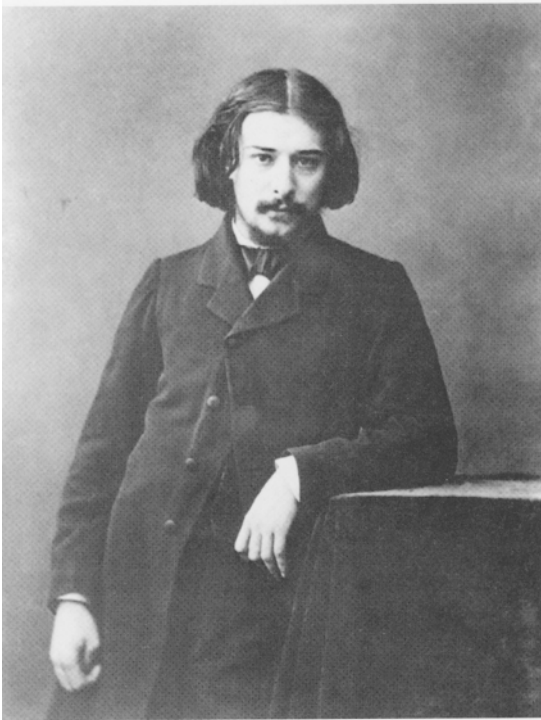
On several occasions Van Gogh mentioned the excess of imagination and the nervous diseases of the Midi, the crimes and the passions caused by the sun and the mistral, and he himself was lost 'in the midst of these exaggerations', even if, like Daudet, he loved the fertile imagination of the Provençal Midi. And Daudet, in mentioning the humble folk in his work, displayed his compassion without taking sides, without demanding social justice, just as Van Gogh did.

Lettres de mon moulin is a collection of tales that has always been the butt of negative criticism, which over time has transformed it into a book for children.²³⁷ On reading it, we can see that it contains very striking parallels with Van Gogh's move from Paris to Arles, as well as elements that can only have encouraged him to go to the Arles region. The burning sun, the Mistral and the cicadas are naturally omnipresent in it, as they are in Vincent's letters; 'too much Mistral and too much sun, – a real Provençal day. [...] I was dreaming of remaining there all day, like a lizard, drinking in the light and listening to the song of the pines.[...] In the elms on the parade, white with dust, crickets were singing lustily.'²³⁸

In the introduction to the collection, entitled 'Installation', Daudet writes:

All this fine Provençal landscape is alive only through the light.

And now, how can you expect me to regret your black, noisy Paris? [...] It is so precisely the corner for which I have been looking, – a little perfumed, warm corner, a thousand leagues from newspapers, cabs, and fog! And what pretty things there are about me! I have hardly been settled for a week, yet my head is filled with impressions and memories.²³⁹



19. Alphonse Daudet,
photograph by Félix Nadar,
1866

Colette Becker remarks that Daudet ‘does not live only in the Provence of beautiful landscapes, picturesque inhabitants who cause merriment – especially to Parisians! – because of their accents or their imaginative “*faculté de mirage*”. The land he loves is not the attractive, easy land of the towns and coastal beaches, but the land which is harsh to man, dulled with heat and the noise of the cicadas, burned by the sun, dried out by the wind, the arid rocks or the chalky scrubland of Fontvieille and its surroundings, Nîmes, Beaucaire, Arles, the Crau desert [...]. Of the two Midis he discerns, the comical bourgeois Midi and the splendid peasant Midi, it is the peasant Midi which he paints in his Letters.’²⁴⁰ One might say that these are truisms about the Midi, but it remains true that the places mentioned map out the region where Van Gogh settled in 1888 with uncanny accuracy; the region where he was to paint the ‘splendid peasant’ Midi. Once this is noted, the parallel with Van Gogh is self-evident.

The story ‘The stars’, which is subtitled ‘Tale of a provençal shepherd’, describes an improbable encounter. Stéphanette, the pretty daughter of the ‘masters’, comes to bring food to a young, twenty-year-old shepherd, and spends the night with him, in total chastity. The young shepherd explains to Stéphanette, who is astonished to see a shooting star for the first time in her life, that it is an ‘soul entering paradise’. Next, he describes the entire firmament with legends and picturesque names, which take on all the more flavour when we think of Van Gogh’s words:

I definitely want to paint a starry sky now. It often seems to me that the night is even more richly coloured than the day, coloured in the most intense violets, blues and greens.

If you look carefully you’ll see that some stars are lemonish, others have a pink, green, forget-me-not blue glow. And without labouring the point, it’s clear that to paint a starry sky it’s not nearly enough to put white spots on blue-black. [678]

And:

But the sight of the stars always makes me dream in as simple a way as the black spots on the map, representing towns and villages, make me dream.

Why, I say to myself, should the spots of light in the firmament be less accessible to us than the black spots on the map of France.

Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star. [638]

And finally:

I've just read Victor Hugo's *L'année terrible*. There's hope there, but – that hope's in the stars. I find that true, and well said, and beautiful; and what's more, I readily believe it myself, too.

But let's not forget that the earth's a planet too, therefore a star or celestial globe. And what if all these other stars were the same!!!!!! It wouldn't be very jolly, in fact you'd have to start all over again.

For art, now – for which you need time, it wouldn't be bad to live more than one life. And it's not without appeal to believe in the Greeks, the old Dutch and Japanese masters, continuing their glorious school on other globes. [642]

The result of this admiration of the firmament is found in his most famous paintings, among them *The poet* (F 462 JH 1574), *Café terrace at night* (F 467 JH 1580), *Starry night over the Rhône* (ill. 30) and *Starry night* (ill. 29).

Lettres de mon moulin also contains the tragic tale 'The Arlésienne', in which Jan, the virtuous son of a family of stalwart peasants, falls hopelessly in love with a girl from Arles, the Arlésienne. But the girl's reputation has been sullied by a scandalous incident from the past, and Jan's marriage is banned. Mad with pain, he eventually commits suicide. Van Gogh searched for a very long time for his Arlésienne, with her proverbial beauty, and perhaps found her model in Madame Ginoux – whose beauty is not undeniable, but who did not suffer in any way by comparison with the other known loves of Vincent's life: Kee, Sien, Agostina Segatori, three dark-haired women, all older than himself, who had had difficult lives. And Van Gogh liked women 'who bore the marks of life'...

From Arles, Vincent advised his friend Emile Bernard to go to Algeria. Van Gogh had never seen Algeria, except through books or in the pictures contained in them. For example, in 'The oranges', Daudet, who was usually sparing with colours, produces a description of the area around Blidah, which is filled with contrasts and colours:

To know oranges well one must have known them at home, in the Balearic Islands, in Sardinia, in Corsica, in Algiers, in the golden blue air and warm atmosphere of the Mediterranean. I recollect a little orange-grove at the gates of Blidah; how beautiful they were there! In the dark, shining, varnished leafage, the fruit had the brilliancy of coloured lamps, and gilded the surrounding air with that aureole of splendour which encircles gaudy flowers. Here and there openings showed through the branches the ramparts of the little town, the minaret of a mosque, the dome of a marabout, and above all the enormous mass of Mount Atlas, green at its base and crowned with snow like white fur, fleecy, a soft mass of fallen flakes.²⁴¹

The story is like a string of coloured beads: 'dust of mother-of-pearl', 'the sheen of white peacock's feathers', 'gold veiled under some transparent white stuff', 'scarlet surplices under lace robes', 'immense blue sea', 'beautiful red gold fruit'...' ²⁴²

Finally, for someone who dreamed of leaving Paris in order to seek more joy in his life, the following passage, taken from 'The legend of the man with the golden brain', is the most appropriate invitation imaginable:

Why should I be sad, after all? I live a thousand miles from the fogs of Paris, on a refulgent hill, in the land of tambourines and Muscat wine. About me is nothing but sunlight and music; I have orchestras of finches and choruses of tomtits; in the morning, curlews which go 'Coureli! Coureli!' at noon cicadae; then shepherds who play the fife, and handsome dusky girls whom I hear laughing in the vines. Indeed, the spot is ill chosen for working in black [i.e. having the blues]; I ought rather to be sending the ladies rose-coloured poems and baskets full of graceful stories. ²⁴³

In short, *Les lettres de mon moulin* echoes Van Gogh's future stay in the Bouches-du-Rhône so strongly that it is very unlikely that there was no connection between the two, bearing in mind Van Gogh's liking for Daudet's work, and the details of his Midi campaign – to which the canvases he painted there clearly belong; they would make perfect illustrations for a de luxe edition of Van Gogh's Letters ... or those from Daudet's windmill. Strangely, this obvious link has never been pointed out until now.

It is true that Van Gogh's two paintings of *Romans Parisiens* (ills. 20, 21) may depict modern realist works, which the painter would not have assembled under this title if he had sought to depict books like *Les lettres de mon moulin*. However, this fact does not in itself constitute proof of his lasting attachment to this genre of literature. On the contrary, the canvases depict a shapeless heap of books which all look alike and are not distinguishable in any way except by their colour. In Paris, the painter did not only read realist Parisian literature, and the most vivid literary memories he brought with him on his journey between 1888 and 1890 were those of a kind of literature devoted to subjects that have nothing to do with Paris: Maupassant's many short stories, Loti's travel writing, Voltaire's *Candide*, and Daudet's non-Parisian novels.

On the subject of literature, Coquiot's biography provides us with another important piece of information about the *Tambourin*, the bar where 'Vincent came to enjoy himself on many evenings.'²⁴⁴ Agostina Segatori, whom Coquiot describes as a likeable woman with a big heart and with whom Vincent perhaps had his last love affair, had opened this bar in 1885. To celebrate the opening she had composed an invitation in the form of a poem, in which she presented the *Tambourin* as a place for wild living, where people could come 'with no fear of the law'.



20. Vincent van Gogh, *Still life with Parisian novels (Romans Parisiens)*, 1887, Private collection; F 359 JH 1332

The place was decorated with tambourines, some painted by fairly well-known artists, and others 'had verses by poets inscribed on their donkey-skins': men of letters, painters, art lovers and critics all came together at the Tambourin ... it was an artists' bar par excellence, where Van Gogh exhibited canvases, lived it up, and had a relationship with the owner. Consequently he had maximum exposure to the literary material of his time. His imperviousness to Decadent and Symbolist literature is all the more striking, and his decision to read easy, entertaining works becomes all the more obvious.

It is impossible to be as precise about what Van Gogh read in Paris between March 1886 and February 1888 as one can be about, for example, his period in The Hague. We know with certainty, from the few letters he wrote in the capital, that he read Guy de Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*. A reading of the letters written during his time in Arles informs us more generally that in Paris he continued his exploration of 'modern French' works, which he had begun in The Hague in 1881-82.



21. Vincent van Gogh, *Parisian novels*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; F 358 JH 1612

It is perhaps this that his *Romans Parisiens* (ill. 20) illustrates: a great diversity of books, yellow, red and green, works published by different authors and different publishers. This is not an affirmation of fidelity to a movement, but an eclectic profession of faith. Among the books he consulted and enjoyed, there was one thing that was fundamental to his subsequent reading programme, which brightened up his intellectual horizons: he discovered that more than anything he needed to laugh, to be entertained. Maupassant, Rabelais, Rochefort, Daudet's less serious works, like *Tartarin de Tarascon*, Pierre Loti and Jules Verne were now a part of his literary landscape, which was less and less intellectual: he did not illustrate his ideas with the aid of literary examples as much as he had done before; he freed himself from them, and left most of the Parisian novels in Paris.

Still life with a statuette

Still life with a statuette (ill. 22) could be seen as the natural counterpart to *Still life with Bible* (ill. 14). Hulsker admitted that he did not understand this canvas, which he described as an 'almost surrealist combination of disparate objects'.²⁴⁵ Sund bases her argument on that of Lövgren in emphasizing that the painting is a study of contrasts and oppositions, notably between the Goncourts' *Germinie Lacerteux*, the modern and tragic example of despair, and Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*, which made Van Gogh laugh. Sund picks up the fact that *Germinie Lacerteux* is an exploration of feminine sensibility, whereas the protagonist of *Bel-Ami*, Georges Duroy, represents an example of stereotypical masculine behaviour, in affairs of the heart as well as in business. Germinie has hurtled down the steps of society and fallen into its vilest depths, while Duroy has climbed them two at a time.²⁴⁶ According to Sund, the plaster statuette depicted in the painting may be the expression of an ideal, emblematic feminine figure, with her sexual attributes isolated from her head and her limbs; a figure of flesh and fertility, contrasting with the rosebud placed in the foreground, depicting the innocence and chastity of youth.

Van Gogh regarded *Germinie Lacerteux* as an extremely important work of art. He recommended it to his sister Wil,²⁴⁷ to Gauguin,²⁴⁸ he gave a copy to Frédéric Salles,²⁴⁹ who accompanied him on the trip from Arles to the lunatic asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, and finally he depicted it in his famous *Portrait of Doctor Gachet* (F 753 JH 2007). He explained to Wil that this book showed life as it is. *Bel-Ami* was just as important to the painter. The character of Duroy, nicknamed Bel-Ami, was to Van Gogh an example of success. But contrary to what Sund states, Van Gogh did not consider it an amusing book. Looked at with complete objectivity, *Bel-Ami*, despite a few humorous traits, is a bitter book, which shows the cynical omnipotence of money, the mistrust of others, cronyism, and betrayal. Van Gogh, who expressed his rejection of colonial excesses to Emile Bernard, and whose human values are very clear, certainly did not laugh as he read the following passage:

And [Duroy] recalled his two years in Africa – how he used to fleece the Arabs round the outposts of the South. A gay, malicious smile passed over his lips at the recollection of an escapade which had cost the lives of three men of the Ouled-Alane tribe, and secured for himself and his comrades twenty chickens, two sheep and some money, and a joke that had lasted for six months.²⁵⁰

Other works by Maupassant are a lot more cheerful, such as *Mont-Oriol* or *La maison Tellier*. Van Gogh was referring to these works, not to *Bel-Ami*, when he stated that he read Maupassant to satisfy his need for laughter.



22. Vincent van Gogh, *Still life with a statuette*, 1887, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo; F360 JH 1349

The pedagogical tone of the letter in which he declared this need for humour should be taken into account while reading it. Van Gogh was trying to urge his sister not to study, but to take advantage of life, in amorous and artistic terms.

He shows that modern literature is necessary to anyone who wishes to experience his or her era fully, especially if he wishes to participate in it as a leading cultural figure – Wil had told him of her plans to write, or to paint. Van Gogh presents himself to his sister as a man who has already been through this stage. He has prepared the ground, explored the way, and attempts to show it to her. He declares implicitly that he has understood, absorbed and integrated modern French literature. As a learned teacher, he has been all the way through it, and explains that he *must* now pass on to other things:

Like me, for instance, who can count so many years in my life when I completely lost all inclination to laugh, leaving aside whether or not this was my own fault, I for one need above all just to have a good laugh. I found that in *Guy de Maupassant* and there are others here, Rabelais among the old writers, Henri Rochefort among today's, where one can find that – *Voltaire in CANDIDE*. [574]

Rabelais's humour is proverbial, but it was not very accessible to Van Gogh; the language in which Rabelais's work was written did not permit an in-depth reading by anyone who did not have at least a smattering of sixteenth-century French.²⁵¹ This mention of Rabelais – the humanist who said that 'to laugh is proper to man' – is the only reference to Renaissance French literature in Van Gogh's correspondence; consequently, it was probably part of a demonstration of cultural knowledge rather than a reference to literature that the painter had actually read.

Still life with a statuette is certainly a study in contrasts. But Van Gogh did not compose many studies that were not so, in colour, form, composition and subject. But *Germinie Lacerteux* and *Bel-Ami* also complement each other. By painting them one on top of the other, Van Gogh may have affirmed his maturity, as he seems no longer to have been content with the sad, beautiful stories of pure realism. This canvas, which allows for numerous interpretations, may therefore testify to his taste for dreaming, for exaggeration, for entertainment. The *truth* does not reside only in factual descriptions of dramatic working-class situations, but also – and perhaps especially – in exaggeration, caricature and laughter. The statuette, whose presence Hulsker does not understand, can be seen as a testimony to the period spent at Cormon's studio, a period of apprenticeship, dry and unreal. The rosebud may herald a new period, more fertile and more alive, closer to nature than the piece of blue and white plaster, which in Van Gogh's eyes could not symbolize a woman in any way. However, this interpretation is governed simply by knowledge of the two novels depicted and does not pretend to make an essential contribution to the art-historical debates about symbolic programmes contained in Van Gogh's paintings.

Cultural baggage

When Van Gogh left Paris, it is with a new set of literary baggage, more vital and closer to own his ideas than the one he had brought with him when he arrived. From the broad spectrum of possibilities offered to him, he chose simple books and entertaining authors as travelling companions: Voltaire, Daudet, Maupassant, Loti, Verne... authors of works which were extremely accessible, entertaining, sometimes profound, but with no didactic or moral character imposed upon them.

Once he had moved to the south, Van Gogh declared that he had 'sensed Voltaire and Zola' everywhere. Zola was a native of Aix-en-Provence, and his *Faute de l'abbé Mouret*, which Van Gogh read, has lengthy descriptions of the landscapes and ambience of the Midi. The association of Voltaire with the Midi, on the other hand, is more curious. *Candide* contains a long journey around the known world and cannot be associated with one place in particular, while *Zadig*, which Vincent also read, has an oriental urban setting, more comparable to Paris than to Arles, and therefore does not offer much help either. It is possible that Van Gogh wanted to express his permanent astonishment, and the impossibility of integrating into the society in which he was living; and that he was comparing this to *Candide*'s constantly renewed astonishment. Like Voltaire's anti-hero, who was incapable of participating in so-called normal life, he too had to be content to observe and submit to social and natural laws which he could not understand, for they were empty of meaning to the 'stranger upon earth' he felt himself to be.

The impression left upon him by *Candide* was altogether remarkable; the book repeats, to anyone who is willing to hear, that 'all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds', but it is not always obvious that the painter grasped the irony of this. Stranger still is his reference to Voltaire himself, who, while in the Midi, had apparently drunk coffee while drying himself off in the sun.²⁵² This is a very specific reference, which researchers ought to be able to locate in a text by or about Voltaire, but so far that reference has not been identified.

These factors enable us to conclude not only that Vincent had no interest in the poetry of his time, but that he was not interested in the philosophy of his era either, nor in that of previous centuries. The only philosophers Vincent mentions (without analyzing their ideas, even briefly) are Diderot and Voltaire. There is not a word about Schopenhauer, Montesquieu, Marx, Hegel, Rousseau, Aristotle... Ideas for ideas' sake did not interest Van Gogh, any more than art for art's sake. It would, however, be hard to say that he had had no opportunity. The fact that he read a book about Wagner,²⁵³ and his few timid references to that musician, acknowledging the Wagnerian vogue which gripped young artists during his time in Paris, enables us to state unreservedly that he was exposed to deep and complex ideas, and to philosophical considerations related to artistic expression. What did

Vincent do with them? Nothing. The profundity of Vincent's works and ideas must be considered in the light of this fact. His work, like his writing, is direct, with no ulterior motives, simple and spontaneous. The explanation of his universality hangs on this fact: his work is *infinitely accessible*, because it is not based on any system with which the viewer must be familiar in order to understand it. It is also this *superficial* attitude that affected the way Vincent looked at what he saw and what he read:²⁵⁴ his gaze and his mind were disarmingly naïve and ingenuous, making him very good at showing glimpses of the fathomless aspect of daily life and the infinite nature of the ordinary. Consequently, any attempt to analyze Van Gogh's letters or paintings in order to prove that he followed a particular artistic, philosophical or religious doctrine seems totally futile; any study that starts from doctrinaire presuppositions is setting off on the wrong foot. At best, one might liken his thinking to that of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: 'Once blasphemy against God was the greatest blasphemy, but God died, and thereupon these blasphemers died too. To blaspheme the earth is now the most dreadful offence, and to esteem the bowels of the Inscrutable more highly than the meaning of the earth.'²⁵⁵

This fundamental aspect also affected his language. It is undeniable that Van Gogh was very gifted in languages. He mastered French and English with great ease, read and quoted German, and wrote with great accuracy in his native language. However, although he became so imbued with French language and culture that he made them totally his own, his Dutch origins could still be detected; and his personality as a simple man, close to the common people and to the earth, would remain paramount and indomitable. This is not because he was incapable of learning the finest subtleties of the French language,²⁵⁶ but because he was not interested in doing so. At the risk of pleonasm, one might say that he was content with what was sufficient. The cultural baggage he had with him when he left Paris in February 1888 seemed perfectly adequate to him. If he had still displayed a great thirst for learning and knowledge before coming to Paris,²⁵⁷ there was no longer any trace of such an attitude once he had left.

The first letter from the Antwerp period, still written in Dutch, is stuffed with French terms, interjections, quotations and injunctions.²⁵⁸ The didactic and literary works and the reviews that Van Gogh read were written in French. It seems that slowly but surely, French imposed itself upon him like a jargon which was necessary to his activities, independent of the fact that he planned to live in Paris; what was the point of speaking Dutch if you were going to write one word out of two in French? This choice was not made during the period when the two brothers were living together, since Vincent was already writing to Theo in French while he was in the Borinage. His French is disconcerting and has fascinated several authors: he was totally at ease in expressing himself, but experienced great difficulties when it came to construction, an observation which inevitably echoes the numerous commentaries on his artistic output.²⁵⁹

9

Last letters

The artist's life: exaggeration and reality

Correspondence undoubtedly acted as a catalyst in the affectionate, brotherly friendship between Theo and Vincent. The correspondence between Johanna Bonger and Theo Van Gogh, the moving chronicle of a marriage which was as happy as it was brief,²⁶⁰ shows how difficult Vincent was to live with. If the bond between Theo and Vincent remained so strong despite everything, it was no doubt thanks to the distance that separated them: it meant that Vincent could make his fiery speeches without being interrupted; he would not fly into a temper if he did not approve of the listener's reaction; and he could set down his ideas in relative tranquillity. A few examples show, moreover, that Van Gogh first composed a draft of certain letters before writing the letter proper. The filtering process that this constituted helped him to clarify what he had to say, thus avoiding misunderstandings arising from his customary rages. Between 1872 and 1890, the relationship between Theo and Vincent was composed solely of letters, a means of expression that enabled them to lapse into literary language without it being a prerogative; the stratagems the brothers used clothed their relationship in a kind of literary garment, the need for which became amply clear at the start of 1888. According to Theo, Vincent was as tired of Paris as Paris was tired of Vincent: 'He finds it impossible to behave towards anybody with indifference. They are either one thing, or the other. He doesn't even find it easy to get on with those who are his best friends, for he spares nothing and no one. The year during which we lived together was very difficult, even though we were often in agreement, especially towards the end.'²⁶¹

When the correspondence resumed, in February 1888, the literary means and references used by Vincent had undergone a change. Still in Paris, he wrote to his sister Wil: 'If one wants truth, life as it is, De Goncourt, for example, in *Germinie Lacerteux*, *La fille Elisa*, Zola in *La joie de vivre* and *L'assommoir* and so many other masterpieces paint life as we feel it ourselves and thus satisfy that need which we have, that people tell us the truth.' [574]

The *truth* as it appears in the books mentioned by Van Gogh gave no cause for rejoicing. Germinie Lacerteux ends up dying a shameful death after descending into a sordid hell; *La fille Elisa* describes the ordinary, sordid life of a prostitute who retains her dreams and her hopes, until the horror of the prison system stifles what was left of humanity in her; *La joie de vivre* is a cynical lecture on greed, falsehood, betrayal and dishonesty, which even the most disinterested devotion cannot manage to tinge with a little humanity; lastly, *L'assommoir* is the archetypal atavistic, alcoholic drama. Faced with all this *truth*, which he nevertheless had to confront directly, Van Gogh said that he needed to laugh. One can well imagine that he did.

Once he was in the Midi, his arguments became subtler. *Pierre et Jean* by Guy de Maupassant had just come out. It is a short, bitter novel, comparable to Zola's *La joie de vivre* in terms of its subject. Pierre and Jean, two sons of a family of shopkeepers, the Rolands, are treated with equal affection by a friend of their parents, Maréchal. On Maréchal's death, Jean, the younger son, inherits his fortune. Pierre receives nothing. Gradually the truth becomes clear: Jean Roland is Maréchal's natural son. Pierre's anger and upstanding character are to no avail; even the cuckolded father prefers to be blind rather than shake up his existence by drawing the conclusions that honour would demand. As for Pierre, he cannot bear this shameful, dishonest situation. He runs away to sea, signing on as a doctor on a steamship, leaving his family to stew in the juice of its own shameful intrigues.

The preface to *Pierre et Jean* was not designed to introduce the novel it precedes. It is a profession of artistic faith. Maupassant, Flaubert's 'former' pupil, distances himself from him with the hard realism of Zola, at the same time protecting himself from the Symbolists, Decadents and Parnassians: 'There is no need for an eccentric vocabulary to formulate every shade of thought – the complicated, multifarious and outlandish words which are put upon us nowadays in the name of artistic writing'²⁶² Van Gogh shared this opinion wholeheartedly.

Am reading *Pierre et Jean* by Guy de Maupassant. It's beautiful – have you read the preface explaining the freedom the artist has to exaggerate, to create in a novel a more beautiful, simpler, more consoling nature, and explaining what Flaubert's phrase might have meant, 'talent is long patience' – and originality an effort of will and intense observation?

There's a Gothic porch here that I'm beginning to think is admirable, the porch of St Trophime, but it's so cruel, so monstrous, like a Chinese nightmare, that even this beautiful monument in so grand a style seems to me to belong to another world, to which I'm as glad not to belong as to the glorious world of Nero the Roman.

Must I tell the truth and add that the Zouaves, the brothels, the adorable little Arlésiennes going off to take their first communion, the priest in his

surplice who looks like a dangerous rhinoceros, the absinthe drinkers, also seem to me like creatures from another world? This doesn't mean I'd feel at home in an artistic world, but it means I prefer to make fun of myself than to feel lonely. And I think I'd feel sad if I didn't see the funny side of everything. [588]

Van Gogh chose the 'the funny side' in preference to distressing reality. The way he looked at the things around him was increasingly distant from the way the Naturalists saw things, and ever closer to the view of a caricaturist. The 'priest in his surplice who looks like a dangerous rhinoceros', but also the zouaves, bordellos and absinthe-drinkers seemed to be 'creatures from another world'. However, Van Gogh was well aware that he himself was the 'stranger upon earth' who belonged to an 'other world'. In Arles, more than ever, his intention was not to depict reality as it was, but reality as he felt it. He sided with Maupassant in his wish to exaggerate and create a more beautiful, simpler nature ... which was also more consoling. This last aspect was a turning-point in his way of envisaging art. The urban, Parisian episode had in no way reduced Van Gogh's determination to be the painter of peasants, to follow Millet, to be a painter of 'paintings in clogs' [663]. Before Paris, in Nuenen, he had wished to paint the whole range of lower orders, highlighting the grimness of his existence. In transmitting his *feelings* to



23. Guy de Maupassant,
photograph by
Félix Nadar.

his paintings, Van Gogh was attempting to create an intimate glimpse, recognizable and authentic. Through this procedure, his canvases would acquire the power to console, a power that he himself had experienced when seeing melancholy, sadness, despair and work depicted with 'true feeling' in the works he admired. From now on, depiction and true feeling alone were no longer enough: he must now simplify and exaggerate: console through hope, through a different way of seeing, rather than consoling through despair, by showing reality as it is. The liberties taken with reality were no longer a useful artifice, but a condition necessary to the work of art. 'What Pissarro says is true – the effects colours produce through their harmonies or discords should be boldly exaggerated. It's the same as in drawing – the precise drawing, the right colour – is not perhaps the essential element we should look for – because the reflection of reality in the mirror, if it was possible to fix it with colour and everything – would in no way be a painting, any more than a photograph.' [620]

Vincent wanted to learn how to see 'with a more Japanese eye': so that he might swiftly perceive what constituted the very essence of reality. The works that resulted from this desire were less true in their depiction, but more true in terms of feeling. In his letters, literary artifice also became increasingly prevalent, with a tone that was more and more reminiscent of that of Daudet and Voltaire, ironic and salient. His description of the porch of Saint-Trophime is a perfect illustration of this: 'another world, to which I'm as glad not to belong as to the glorious world of Nero the Roman.' [588] It was no longer a question of being a martyr or of depicting martyrs so as to reassure other martyrs that they were not alone, but of choosing the 'funny side', and through beauty, light and nature, offering people a reality that was *less* sad than it actually was: it was consolation through beauty itself, secular and full of promise. Van Gogh consciously chose to be blind, like Roland senior in *Pierre et Jean*, and with strength and good humour attempted to remember that 'all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'.

So when he felt he had been swindled by an innkeeper, he related events by means of references to *Tartarin de Tarascon*:

My dear Theo,

I'm writing you another few lines to tell you that I've been to see the gentleman whom the Arab Jew in Tartarin calls 'the shustish of the beace'. I still got 12 francs back and my host was reprimanded for keeping my trunk; as I wasn't refusing to pay, he had no right to hold it. [609]

In Arles, Van Gogh plunged headlong into a 'artistic world' which he created entirely for himself. He put on a pair of spectacles with a distorting lens. He was a *total* artist: he existed only for his art, and everything was a pretext for producing canvases. He took no breaks, sacrificing himself upon the altar of fine art. His

letters became more than ever an artist's letters; accounts of a painting campaign, reports from a missionary addressed to his mother house. Just as when he had lived with Theo in Paris, literature played a major role in the justification, illustration and construction of his ideas, through examples and comparison. The preface to *Pierre et Jean* was undoubtedly among the most characteristic elements of this new attitude. More ambiguous was the role of a book that seemed to possess everything Van Gogh could wish for: *Madame Chrysanthème* by Pierre Loti.

Loti's Japan

Perhaps under the influence of Gauguin, during his stay in Paris Van Gogh was convinced that the painting of the future would have what he called 'the tropics' as its setting. Coquiote describes Gauguin as a haughty, arrogant man, wearing a 'bizarre outfit'. Charles Morice, 'his friend, the person who best knew the painter of Tahiti', spoke of 'the delicious incorrectness of his speech, in which seafaring slang and painters' jargon strangely clad absolutely pure, noble ideas'.²⁶³ This was manna from Heaven for Van Gogh, who asked nothing more than a firm, authoritative opinion on the questions he raised. Gauguin came from the 'tropics',



24. Pierre Loti,
Van Gogh Museum Archive

Japan was in the 'tropics', and as the Midi, in Van Gogh's mind, was the Japan of France, everything could be brought together resulting in a glorious campaign under the command of Gauguin, according to Van Gogh the most intelligent of the artists on the Petit Boulevard.²⁶⁴ 'About staying in the south, even if it's more expensive – Look, we love Japanese painting, we've experienced its influence – all the Impressionists have that in common – and we wouldn't go to Japan, in other words, to what is the equivalent of Japan, the south? So I believe that the future of the new art still lies in the south after all.' [620]

In *Le mariage de Loti*, by Pierre Loti, Van Gogh had enjoyed the descriptions of the 'nature of Otaheite', a setting in Loti's work, and a principal motif in Gauguin's canvases. Gauguin emphasizes in *Avant et après* that 'Daudet, de Goncourt, the Bible burned the brain of the Dutchman'.²⁶⁵ Here, in a sentence, and with a reference to the past, he summed up Vincent's literary taste and interests. The mention of Daudet, the first reference to come into Gauguin's mind, strengthens the hypothesis that Van Gogh could not have been unaware of *Lettres de mon moulin*, the collection which may have contributed to inspiring his choice of destination. However, the destinations of which Van Gogh dreamed under the aegis of Gauguin were much further away than the Midi. And Loti's accounts enabled him to picture them.

Madame Chrysanthème, the account of a voyage to Japan, came out in 1888; Van Gogh read it immediately. At first, the painter showed little enthusiasm for *Madame Chrysanthème*. He merely made a brief comment: 'it provides interesting remarks about Japan.' [628] Later he would develop a few anecdotal aspects of the account, although the action does not seem to have made an impression upon him, which is understandable. *Madame Chrysanthème* is a book whose racism would be unacceptable today and which displays an unusual degree of narrow-mindedness. In Loti's defence, we must remember that he was above all a soldier, and that as such, he travelled because he had to oversee the survival of an empire, not because he had a taste for finding out about foreign cultures. Loti did not like Japan. He declares: 'a great love for little children [...] It is the only thing I really like about this country: the babies and the manner in which they are understood.'²⁶⁶ So it was certainly not in Loti's work that Van Gogh found the inspiration for his passion for all things Japanese, quite the contrary. Further on, the naval officer writes: 'We are in Japan, and under the narrowing and dwarfing influence of the surroundings, which turn everything into ridicule, nothing will come of it all.'²⁶⁷

Madame Chrysanthème is the chronicle of a strange marriage. Thanks to a go-between, the narrator, Loti himself, goes to Japan in order to contract a temporary marriage with a young Japanese woman. The sexual aspect is absent from the account – at most it is suggested by trailing dots which take the place of a description of the wedding night. The book's subject is a succession of impressions

influenced by simplistic prejudices. The marriage, which is desired out of boredom, lasts until the officer is posted elsewhere. Loti's book treads a line between paedophilia, sexual tourism and racist contempt.

With reference to the Buddhist monastery described in *Madame Chrysanthème*, Druick and Zegers state that 'The Yellow House was also a bonzerie'.²⁶⁸ This point of view is debatable. It is true that Van Gogh writes:

Have you read *Madame Chrysanthème*? It really gave me a lot to think about, that the real Japanese have NOTHING ON THEIR WALLS. The description of the cloister or pagoda where there's *nothing* (the drawings, the curiosities, are hidden in drawers). Ah, so that's how you have to look at a japonaiserie – in a nice bright room, completely bare, open to the landscape. Would you like to try it out with these two drawings of the Crau and the banks of the Rhône WHICH DON'T LOOK JAPANESE and which are perhaps more so than others, in fact? Look at them in a nice bright café where there's nothing else in the way of paintings – or out of doors. There should perhaps be a reed frame like a thin strip of wood. Myself, I work here in a bare interior, 4 white walls and red tiles on the floor. If I insist on your looking at these two drawings this way it's because I would like so much to give you a true idea of the simplicity of nature in these parts. [639]

In *Madame Chrysanthème*, the characteristic feature of the bonzerie is that it is a building 'without the least ornament [...] not a seat, not a cushion, not a scrap of furniture'.²⁶⁹ When Van Gogh rented the Yellow House, he hurriedly furnished it, and Roland Dorn has demonstrated the care which Van Gogh took in decorating the rooms.²⁷⁰ Van Gogh's supposed bonzerie would consequently be reduced to the room where he worked, 'a bare interior, 4 white walls and red tiles on the floor'. But can the Yellow House be reduced to Van Gogh's studio?

Next, in connection with Loti's book, we must mention Van Gogh's *Self-portrait as a bonze* (ill. 25), which he sent to his friend Gauguin. This self-portrait seems to indicate a wish to show himself in a serious, absorbed light, which poses a problem when we consider the view Loti had of Japanese bonzes. Rather than being contemplative, serious and devoted monks, exclusively preoccupied with spiritual things, disdaining the here and now in favour of a deep, timeless mysticism, Loti's Japanese bonzes appear frankly ridiculous, and entirely earthbound: 'Our friends the bonzes, notwithstanding an unctuousness of manner thoroughly ecclesiastical, are very ready to laugh, – a simple, pleased, childish laughter; plump, chubby, shaven and shorn, they dearly love our French liqueurs and know how to take a joke.'²⁷¹

When the narrator shows them the 'profane drawings in our illustrated papers', the bonzes 'let their fingers linger upon the pictures which represent the ladies'.²⁷²



25. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-portrait as bonze*, 1888, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; F 476 JH 1581

Van Gogh perhaps knew other examples of bonzes apart from those he found in *Madame Chrysanthème*. All the same, it would be unthinkable that the Dutchman, who urged his correspondents to read Loti's account, would not have thought of his bonzes when composing his self-portrait. Loti's descriptions make us think of what Vincent wrote when he invited Gauguin to come and join him in his little yellow house, as long as his colleague was prepared to live like a monk who went to the brothel once a fortnight. Van Gogh's *Self-portrait as a bonze*, which he gave Gauguin in exchange for a portrait of Gauguin as Jean Valjean, was inevitably steeped in literature. Vincent wrote to Gauguin about his work: 'But exaggerating my personality also, I too looked more for the character of a bonze, a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha.' [695]

In the portrait in question, Van Gogh slanted his eyes, flattened his skull, and gave himself a kind of halo of impasto in the background of the painting. He wrote that he had tried to *exaggerate* his personality. Now, his personality is increasingly to be found 'on the funny side', and 'in artistic life'. Seen from this standpoint, and in accord with the bonzes found in *Madame Chrysanthème*, which remained the only known literary source for Van Gogh as far as Japanese bonzes were concerned, far from presenting himself as a meditative man, absorbed in contemplation, Van Gogh showed Gauguin that there was also jovial camaraderie to be found in Arles; moreover, his expression is slightly smiling, serene, confident, *mischievous*. This light approach to the monastic state is equally coherent with the painter's taste for *Tartarin de Tarascon*, for example, where derision is everywhere. The *artistic* view of the world does not exclude the way one sees oneself, and Van Gogh, who wanted to make 'a lot of noise', because he aspired 'to share the renown of the immortal Tartarin de Tarascon' [599], reduced himself to his own caricature. He exaggerated the *composition* that he presented of himself, deriding himself in his portrait as a Japanese bonze, just as he did again and again in his letters. Of course, such a literary approach to this important self-portrait can make no claim to be a contribution to the art-historical discourse, but again, the contents of the books Van Gogh refers to, explicitly or implicitly, offer a possibility of casting light on a painting from an undervalued direction.

However, Van Gogh did not subscribe to a simplified view of reality; he wrote that 'this artistic life, which we know isn't *the* real one, seems so alive to me' [602], which shows that he was aware of the limits of the state in which he forced himself to develop. He wrote: 'However, let's not forget Bouvard et Pécuchet, let's not forget À vau l'eau, because all of that is very, very profoundly true. Au bonheur des dames and Bel-ami, that's no less true, however. It's ways of seeing things – now, with the first one, we're less in danger of behaving like Don Quixote; it's possible, and with the last idea we go the whole hog.' [669]

Bouvard et Pécuchet by Flaubert and *A vau-l'eau* by Huysmans are two realist novels describing running away, aborted plans, and successive failures. On the

other hand, Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* and Zola's *Au bonheur des dames* describe dazzling successes and unstoppable social climbing. Although aware that these novels were works of fiction, Van Gogh did not consider them any less *real*.

He fought against illusions at the same time as maintaining them, for it was in creating a new kind of art that he hoped to achieve his salvation. The prime objective of this hope, which he recognized in *Bel-Ami* and *Au bonheur des dames*, was not to culminate in something concrete, but was content to remain a hope, the breeding ground for his Panglossian optimism:

Yes, I'm as well now as other men, which I have only been briefly – in Nuenen, for example – and that's not disagreeable. By 'other men' I mean a bit like the road-menders on strike, père Tanguy, père Millet, the peasants. If you're well, you should be able to live on a piece of bread, while working the whole day long, and still having the strength to smoke and to drink your glass; you need that in these conditions.

And still to feel the stars and the infinite, clearly, up there. Then life is almost magical, after all. Ah, those who don't believe in the sun down here are truly blasphemous. [663]

Life was 'magical' as long as he could manage to alternate periods of intense creation and moments of voluntary stupefaction, when he 'drinks a glass too many to deaden himself'. Van Gogh constantly juggled between artificial physical states in order to maintain his productivity and his sensibility, at the same time preserving his health – in his own way. He became fired up whenever he came into contact with the sun, and snuffed out his internal fires by means of alcoholic intoxication and through the 'stupefaction' caused by tobacco. The balance he sought was an extremely precarious one.

If I thought about, if I dwelled on the disastrous possibilities, I could do nothing – I throw myself into work with abandon, I re-emerge from it with my studies; if the storm within roars too loudly, I drink a glass too many to deaden myself.

It's being crazy, compared with what one ought to be.

But earlier on, I felt less of a painter, painting is becoming a distraction for me, like hunting rabbits for the crazy people who do it to distract themselves.

My attention is becoming more intense, my hand steadier.

And that's why I dare almost give you an assurance that my painting will become better. Because that's all I have left.

Have you read in De Goncourt that Jules Dupré also gave them the impression that he was crazy? [645]

On the one hand, Vincent wanted to detach himself from real life and live the life of an artist, but on the other hand, he did not want to detach himself from reality to such an extent that he subsided into totally quixotic illusions, disastrous and absurd. In his painting, this balance (or imbalance) was found in his choice of subjects and in the execution: the subjects were always taken from nature, and based on reality, but at the same time, in the composition, technique and, increasingly, the design, Vincent gave his personal, *artistic* vision all the latitude it needed to express itself. He was a *peasant* painter, his feet anchored in the nourishing earth; a painter who ‘felt’ ‘the stars and the infinite, clearly, up there’ [663]. Previously, pessimistic documentary realism enabled him to render *reality* by ‘grasping nature at close quarters’, a process that was very close to his heart in Nuenen. But now, imagination, simplification and exaggeration enabled him to express himself, maintaining contact with reality, *l’effet vrai*, the possible, and consequently with *hope*. In Arles, hope or expectation thus gave a new form to what Van Gogh believed was the vital factor in art: consolation.²⁷³ And this area of tension, created and maintained between the attachment to reality and the wish to give hope through exaggeration and simplification, influenced his literary tastes in the same way that it influenced his painting.

The painter, whose taste for *Madame Chrysanthème* grew the longer it was since he had read it, showed once again how capable he was of reading into a text something that was simply not there. He declared his boundless admiration of Japan; how was it possible, then, that he could bear to see Japanese culture denigrated to this extent by Loti? The only explanation is that the Van Gogh ‘filtered’ the text he read, ignoring what he did not like, and distorting what he did like in order to create even more pleasing elements. He retained only a few details, such as the picturesque go-between, Monsieur Kangourou, who makes the narrator sample ‘salted bonbons’ and ‘sugared peppers’, culinary contrasts which, according to Van Gogh, reflected the ever-present Japanese taste for strong contrasts in general.

As ever, when it came to the immense majority of the works and authors quoted, Van Gogh mentioned only what he liked. He almost never mentioned a book to say bad things about it, except when it was a book that someone else had asked him to read. In his correspondence, we find this same selective optimism regarding what he *saw*. Van Gogh essentially mentioned what he considered beautiful; there was little room for anything that was not in his descriptions.

As the story progresses in Loti’s account, with a coherence that sometimes leaves much to be desired, the bonzerie – which was at first so sober – suddenly ceases to be a brightly-lit, empty pagoda: ‘But for all that, let the sanctuary be ever so immense and imposing in its sombre gloom, the idols ever so superb, all seems in Japan but a mere semblance of grandeur. A hopeless pettiness, an irresistible feeling of the ludicrous, lies at the bottom of all things.’²⁷⁴

The shrine is now 'sombre' and 'immense'! The perfect antithesis of what Van Gogh thought of his *little* yellow house, burned by a big sun and painted with whitewash. In short, the Yellow House is *contrasted with* Loti's bonzerie. Above all, *Madame Chrysanthème* is a long insult to Buddhism and to Japan: 'Little, finical, affected – all Japan is contained, both physically and morally, in these three words.'²⁷⁵ In fact, Van Gogh undoubtedly confused the description of the pagoda with the description of Japanese dwellings, whose simplicity Loti describes: something that Van Gogh had noticed before contaminating the bonzerie with it: 'Loti's book, Mme Chrysanthème taught me this: the apartments are bare, without decorations or ornaments.' [642]

One final analogy between Van Gogh's work and *Madame Chrysanthème* is *La mousmé* (ill. 26). Druick and Zegers believe that this painting has its origins in Loti's book; the young girl represents love, and the oleander she holds in her hands is the symbol of the poison which that love contains, despite its beautiful appearance.²⁷⁶ We may wonder if love is ever dealt with in Loti's book. Moreover, the love of a little girl of thirteen, in addition to being indecent, has no equivalent in the history of Vincent's amours. He liked women who were older than he was, 'who bore the marks of life', like Sien, Kee Vos, and la Segatori, a list to which one is tempted to add Madame Ginoux, one of the models for *The novel reader* (F 497 JH 1632). As for the cliché about the poison of love, this innocent little girl might be its repository in Van Gogh's mind, but is that not verging on speculation? What is certain, although Druick and Zegers make no mention of it, is that *Madame Chrysanthème* contains the description of a young Japanese girl who is not Madame Chrysanthème but an unknown girl spotted by chance, and who at the same time represents one of the rare positive points which Loti concedes to Japan: 'Over her quaint little head, her round umbrella with its thousand ribs threw a great halo of blue and red, edged with black, and an oleander full of flowers growing among the stones of the bridge spread its glory behind her, bathed, like herself, in sunshine. Behind this youthful figure and this flowering shrub all was blackness.'²⁷⁷

The depiction is not the same, but the colours correspond perfectly with *La mousmé*: the young girl is dressed in red and blue, she holds a branch of oleander in flower, and her armchair plays the part of the black border. Loti continues his description of his mousmé, spotted by chance, as an 'exquisite little person, of a type so ideally Japanese'.²⁷⁸

All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds

Van Gogh applied drastic selection to his reading of *Madame Chrysanthème*, distorting its content, and he retained only the few fragments which accorded



26. Vincent van Gogh, *La mousmé*, 1888, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection; F 431 JH 1519

with his arguments and his artistic plan. It was the same with the other books he read, and to a certain extent with his perception of reality. The artistic filter that Van Gogh imposed upon himself may appear to be a fatal factor, which carried Van Gogh away into frenzied passions. Nevertheless, at the start of his stay in Arles, he wrote: 'With my temperament, to lead a wild life and to work are no longer compatible at all, and in the given circumstances I'll have to content myself with making paintings. That's not happiness and not real life, but what can you say, even this artistic life, which we know isn't *the* real one, seems so alive to me, and it would be ungrateful not to be content with it.' [602]

This passage suggests that the choice of the artistic life was a deliberate, considered, calculated decision. As Leo Jansen remarks, Van Gogh's recourse to the philosophy of Pangloss, the philosopher and teacher of *Candide, ou l'optimisme*, who constantly states against all odds that 'all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds' was a conscious way of putting up obstacles to the despair which lay in wait for him.²⁷⁹

In one passage where Van Gogh pokes fun at himself in quite a racy way, the reference to Pangloss illustrates this illusion of will, which Van Gogh maintained during his first months in Arles:

Do you remember in Guy de Maupassant the gentleman who hunted rabbits and other game and who had hunted so hard for 10 years and was so worn out with running after game that at the point when he wanted to get married he couldn't get a hard-on, which caused him the greatest anxieties and consternation.

Without being in this gentleman's position as far as having or wishing to get married, in the physical sense I'm beginning to resemble him. According to the excellent master Ziem, a man becomes ambitious the moment he can't get a hard-on. Now, while it's more or less the same to me whether or not I can get a hard-on, I protest when it must inevitably lead me to ambition.

There is no one but the greatest philosopher of his time and of his country, and therefore of all countries and all times – the excellent master Pangloss – who could – if here were there – give me advice and calm my soul. [638]

The Midi campaign that Van Gogh proposed to conduct, and during which he wished to produce a series of canvases giving an almost complete idea of Provence, was a long and difficult one. Van Gogh's principal enemy seemed to be loneliness, which weighed heavily on him. He did not succeed in forging any true friendships, and above all encountered suspicion, doubtless on account of his brusque manner. At a time when he was still not selling anything and could not fit into the society where he was living and working, he was able to sustain his morale through his ingenuousness, optimism and humour and by ridiculing

himself. That was all he had. The dream and the illusion were contrasted against the evidence of a too-brutal reality. Van Gogh needed to cast himself into a better future, even if he accepted that he might not harvest the fruits of his work; an attitude which was ambiguous, destructive and fatally ... resigned. Just as in his youth he had accepted St Paul's idea that one must find joy in one's sadness, Van Gogh rejoiced in his difficulties. Pangloss had replaced St Paul, but the plan was the same. All would be well! He could feel it. And this confidence in the future of a new kind of art, begun in Japan, continued in the Midi, and which, according to him, would reach its apogee in the Tropics, was his consolation, his hope. Van Gogh survived because of this dream of an artistic renewal, which would involve simplification, a lot of work (in Flaubert's words, 'talent is long patience'), and 'a revolutionary's spirit with French good cheer': powerful, abundant energy, a frenzy of work, a permanent creative fever. Vincent summed it up very well in a remark written at the beginning of his time in Arles:

And in short doesn't it do us a tremendous amount of good to listen to the wise advice of Rivet and Pangloss, those splendid optimists of the true and jovial Gallic race who leave you your self-esteem? Yet, if we want to live and work, we must be very careful and look after ourselves. Cold water, air, good simple food, wear the right clothes, sleep in a good bed and don't have worries. And not letting yourself go with the women and real life to the extent you might like to. [603]

Van Gogh seemed always to need to read in order to be informed and become more cultivated. But the few books he mentioned in his letters seem to indicate that he read far less during this period. In fact, his thirst for knowledge had been slaked. He no longer read as much as before, and seemed to need nothing more than to sacrifice to an old habit, as he wrote to his sister Wil, on 22 June 1888:

I haven't read much lately, except *Madame Chrysantheme* by Pierre Loti.

Also *L'abbé Constantin* by Ohnet,²⁸⁰ terribly sweet and heavenly, so that even his *Maître des forges*, already tending that way, becomes even more suspect. Sometimes, out of ravenous hunger, I even read the newspaper here with fury, but don't take this to mean that I have a need to read. On the contrary, in fact, because I prefer to look at things myself. But it's simply become a habit to read for a few hours in the evening, so one can't help feeling that one's missing something, but you can tell that this isn't irksome from the fact that what one sees is interesting. [626]

He read little and with a critical eye. He wanted to see through his own eyes, and not through the eyes of another artist. He needed optimism, illusory courage. So,

when he read Daudet's *L'immortel*, he expressed the need to return into a world of fancy, to impossible and artificial happiness:

At the moment, I'm at last reading Daudet's *L'immortel*, which I find very beautiful but hardly consoling.

I believe that I'll have to read a book about elephant hunting, or a totally mendacious book of categorically impossible adventures, by Gustave Aimard for example, in order to get over the heartbreak that *L'immortel* will leave in me. Particularly because it's so beautiful and so true, in making one feel the emptiness of the civilized world. I must say that for real power I prefer his *Tartarin* though. [672]

L'immortel is no pamphlet, but a veritable *sacking* of the Académie Française. Daudet's novel, crafted in the realist manner, describes the tragic and caricatural, *typical* destiny of a man who has all the qualities required in order to be elected to the prestigious Académie, but who forgets along the way to live in a dignified, honest way and above all happily, at one with the world. Carried along by schemes and intrigues essentially orchestrated by his wife, going along with them because of his weakness and ambition, he finds himself confronted by the nothingness of his existence when a scandal breaks and he has to face up to public opprobrium and adversity. He throws himself into the Seine, sickened and disillusioned, aware that he has made a total failure of his life.

Vincent considered that all of this was very fine and very real, but he rejected its 'distress'. He preferred the lies, the 'utterly impossible adventures' of the priceless Gustave Aimard, author of westerns and other adventure books. We find Gustave Aimard again, and this is undoubtedly not by chance, in Vincent's bedside book: *Tartarin de Tarascon*:

In vain did he surround himself with baobabs and other African trees, to widen his horizon, and some little to forget his club and the market-place; in vain did he pile weapon upon weapon, and Malay kreese upon Malay kreese; in vain did he cram with romances, endeavouring like the immortal Don Quixote to wrench himself by the vigour of his fancy out of the talons of pitiless reality. Alas! all that he did to appease his thirst for deeds of daring only helped to augment it. The sight of all the murderous implements kept him in a perpetual stew of wrath and exaltation. His revolvers, repeating rifles, and duck-guns shouted 'Battle! battle!' out of their mouths. Through the twigs of the baobab, the tempest of great voyages sighed and blew bad advice. To finish him came Gustave Aimard, Mayne Reid, and Fenimore Cooper.²⁸¹

For Tartarin as for Van Gogh, Aimard was a way of 'wrenching himself by the vigour of his fancy out of the talons of pitiless reality', like Don Quixote who escaped in his novels of chivalry. *L'immortel* did not permit this dream, but on the contrary plunged Van Gogh back into the merciless Parisian reality from which he had fled. The painter *needed* to dream. The impossible dream was an integral part of his view of the world and of his artistic plan.

Among the 'utterly impossible' adventure stories which Van Gogh consulted at this moment in his life, we must also cite those of Jules Gérard, nicknamed the 'lion-slayer'. Gérard, and this is not accidental either, is also cited in *Tartarin de Tarascon* as Tartarin's inspiration: 'Tartarin furnished all the elucidation desired. He had read *The Life of Jules Gerard, the Lion-Slayer*, and had lion-hunting at his finger ends, as if he had been through it himself. Hence he orated upon these matters with great eloquence.'²⁸²

In his books *La chasse aux lions* (1855), *Tueur de lions* (1860) et *L'Afrique du nord: description, histoire, armée, populations, administration et colonisation, chasses, le Maroc...* (1860), Jules Gérard set down his memories of life as a great African hunter. Vincent was inspired by at least one of his books when he declared:

To work quickly isn't to work less seriously, it depends on the confidence and experience one has.

In the same way, Jules Guérard the lion-hunter says in his book that at the beginning young lions have a lot of trouble killing a horse or an ox, but old lions kill with a single well-judged strike from a claw or a tooth, and have an amazing sureness for that job. [630]

Further than ever from Zola's Naturalism, light-years away from his fanatical reading of Thomas à Kempis or Bossuet, Vincent used the most accommodating aspects that this fantastical, exotic literature could offer him. He wanted to acquire the precision and assurance of an old lion himself, aware of what he was doing, attempting above all to preserve his health and his good mood, thus placing himself as far as possible in a situation where he could produce successful paintings. He had studied profound books and steeped himself in their contents; now he was comparing himself to phantasmagorias, placing himself in an illusory context, dreaming openly, outside of any reasoned context. That being said, and no doubt thanks to this attitude, his artistic plan was precise, controlled and determined: the driving forces of his Midi campaign, which was perfectly reflected in his reading material, were derision, caricature and dreaming. Inevitably, as an eternal rebel, he freed himself and distanced himself increasingly from the books he read. He no longer read in order to shape his mind, and in fact read less and less, concentrating all his energies on painting.

The literary eye

Van Gogh was fascinated by revolutionary movements, although he had no ambition to take an active part in any popular uprising; and this fascination can be seen in the context of this idea: the painter, who in his youth read Michelet's *La révolution française*, and who admired Delacroix, did so in the *hope* of seeing a new era arrive, and increasingly he rejected reality as he found it around him. Moreover, he rejected reality so much that he had no desire to replace it with *another, inevitably distressing reality*, which would be the consequence of a social revolution. He was content to love the invariably comforting *idea* of an artistic revolution. Like Tartarin and his fellow-inhabitants of Tarascon, he preferred to *imagine* a future or a better reality than to try to live it. His literary panorama was the mirror of his state of mind. For Van Gogh, the revolution was an eternal tomorrow, a beautiful illusion, which should be experienced today through anticipation, without dazzle and without glory, through simplicity and work.

I prefer to wait for the generation to come, which will do in portraits what Claude Monet is doing in landscape, the rich, bold landscape in the style of Guy de Maupassant.

Now I know that I myself am not one of those people, but didn't the Flauberts and Balzacs make the Zolas and Maupassants? So here's to – not us – but the generation to come. [662]

To Vincent, Emile Zola was a representative of reality, of real life. Although the painter never ceased to admire the novelist's work, from 1888 onwards he no longer referred to his books in order to justify some aspect or other of his artistic plans. Zola, an innovator in his time, was now regarded by Vincent as a great witness of his era, who, like Balzac, was able to describe an entire society. But his society was that of the Second Empire, not that of 1888; and still less that of the future. Maupassant, on the other hand, had the advantage of being part of the present. In addition, the liberties that he took with reality made it possible to escape from the distressing pressures of daily life, unlike the resigned fatalism of Zola's works.

It is not surprising, in this context, to note that Van Gogh even acquired a taste for the books of Jules Verne, whose work has always suffered from a lack of literary recognition. The correspondence contains only two references to Jules Verne, but Van Gogh, who comes across as an artist who is completely up to date with the artistic and literary developments of his time, perhaps did not cite Verne as often as he would have done if science fiction had had a better press in his era.

In Arles, Vincent got on well with the Danish painter Christian Vilhelm Mourier-Petersen (1858-1945), who nevertheless returned to Paris after a brief

stay. The first comment Vincent made about him describes him as resembling one of Loti's characters: 'The Swede is from a good family, he has order and regularity in his means of support, and as a man he makes me think of those characters Pierre Loti creates. For all that he's phlegmatic, he has a good heart.' [613] Heart is not the most striking characteristic of Loti's principal characters. As if to compensate for this, the secondary characters are overflowing with it. Throughout Loti's work, we find a self-assured narrator, possessing a form of reason which is authoritarian and narrow-minded, contrasted with a secondary character who is essentially governed by his emotions. Thus, in *Madame Chrysanthème*, the narrator will never fall in love with his temporary wife, whereas an entirely chaste romance develops between Chrysanthème and Yves, the officer's right-hand man, who is known for his cursory arguments and whose approach to life is at best instinctive. His kindness and devotion are as animal in nature as the attitudes of the Japanese we encounter. It is undoubtedly Yves, who appears again in *Mon frère Yves*, whom Van Gogh was thinking of when he said 'for all that he's phlegmatic, he has a good heart': he is a decent fellow, not very deep but loyal. The second literary comparison used to describe Mourier-Petersen is more caricatural and refers to a Jules Verne character: 'And dear old Doctor Ox, I mean our Swede, Mourier, I liked him well enough because, with his spectacles, he went naïvely and benignly about this wicked world, and because I presumed he had a heart that was purer than many a heart, and even with more of a leaning towards rectitude than many of the cleverest people have.' [625]

This description, which confirms the parallel with Loti's Yves, is fairly close to the character of Doctor Ox, who was described by Jules Verne in a burlesque way as a man obsessed with science, who attempted an original experiment. Its aim was to reinvigorate the inhabitants of a small Flemish town, whose chief characteristics were slowness, lethargy and inertia. Postulating that oxygen supplied the body with energy, he set up an oxygen distribution network all over the town. The consequences were disastrous: the inhabitants became so excessively agitated that eventually a veritable civil war broke out, putting an end to the experiment. The character of Doctor Ox was not, however, naïve enough to declare that he 'went naïvely and benignly about this wicked world'. What is more, Jules Verne made no mention of the 'spectacles' referred to by Van Gogh – and which Mourier-Petersen wore. A character much closer to Vincent's description is the geographer Paganel, described in *Les enfants du Capitaine Grant*: 'The man he saw was tall and thin, and might be forty; he looked like a long nail with a big head; his head was large, his forehead high, his nose long, his mouth wide, and his chin prominent. As to his eyes, he hid them behind enormous round spectacles, and his look seemed to have the indecision peculiar to nyctalops.'²⁸³ Paganel encounters the other protagonists in Verne's novel when he boards the wrong boat. He thinks he is embarking for India, and finds himself on a ship bound for Chile. His good humour,

his amiability and his ingenuousness, as well as his large spectacles, make him closer to Van Gogh's Mourier-Petersen than Doctor Ox.

Even if it is not certain that Van Gogh was thinking of Paganel when he mentioned Doctor Ox, he is nevertheless representative of what Van Gogh enjoyed in literature during the year 1888: he is a caricatured individual, amusing, energetic and good-natured. Van Gogh himself attempted to resemble a character of this type, and wrote his letters accordingly:

Xanthippe, mère Tanguy and some other ladies have, by some strange freak of nature, brains of flintstone or gunflint. Certainly these ladies are much more harmful in the civilized society in which they move than the citizens bitten by rabid dogs who live at the Institut Pasteur. So père Tanguy would be right a thousand times over if he killed his lady.... but he doesn't do it, any more than Socrates ...

And for that reason père Tanguy is more closely connected – in terms of resignation and long patience – with the early Christian martyrs and slaves than with present-day Paris pimps. [638]

Mourier is Doctor Ox; Madame Tanguy is Xanthippe, the archetypal sour-tempered woman, compared in passing to the mad dogs of the Institut Pasteur; Old M. Tanguy is a Christian martyr from antiquity ... Van Gogh himself is like Guy de Maupassant's rabbit hunter. He and his brother are comparable to the Goncourts – relatively speaking. His artistic plan has a part to play in a process, resembling the one that led from Balzac to Zola, and from Flaubert to Maupassant. When he sees a stagecoach, he paints it because it makes him think of a stagecoach described in *Tartarin de Tarascon*. Gauguin is a character in the Loti style ... Van Gogh's artistic eye was working at full capacity. His literary landscape reflected what that eye perceived: fantastical works, accounts of journeys, a philosophical tale ... it was all worth using to illustrate the fact that from now on he was aiming to go beyond reality.

Then the crisis occurred. The conclusion that Van Gogh drew from it is significant: he had 'monté le cou' (deceived himself) too much, had harboured too many illusions, both drunk and lucid. Three months after the episode of the severed ear, he wrote: 'How strange these last three months appear to me. Sometimes nameless moral anguish, then moments when the veil of time and of the inevitability of circumstances seemed to open up a little way for the space of a blink of an eye. Certainly, you're right after all, darned right – even allowing for hope, one probably has to accept the rather distressing reality.' [753]

The end of the dream

During the first nine months Van Gogh spent in Arles, alone, before the crisis occurred, his anticipation of Gauguin's arrival was a recurrent theme in his letters. For his part, Gauguin did not seem to be in much of a hurry to join 'Vangog', knowing that living with that asocial individual would be very difficult to put up with. But his interests and his financial needs left him no choice. So eventually, after countless hesitations, he agreed to make the journey to Arles.

Van Gogh's impatient wait mirrored the process of distancing himself from reality that was taking place inside him: his *artistic* view of the world clearly included Gauguin and his planned stay. Here, he reached the limits of conscious action. If it was relatively innocent to see a priest as a 'dangerous rhinoceros', it was rather more dangerous for Van Gogh to build castles in the air when he had placed all his hopes of achieving a place in art history on founding a studio of avant-garde artists. As the moment of Gauguin's actual arrival drew nearer, the descriptions of his stay became more and more colourful, more and more literary, and more and more illusory.²⁸⁴

At the start, Van Gogh thought only of simple collaboration. Gauguin, the sailor, could teach Vincent how to prepare his meals, and the two artists together would thus spend less than Van Gogh – who ate at the restaurant – spent on his own. Van Gogh's expectations swiftly became more specific and began to grow. From being merely *useful*, the collaboration became *necessary*. He and Gauguin would become *the* painters of the Midi, and Bernard could join them. They could share all their works, all their profits and all their losses. Then Van Gogh envisaged broader horizons, speaking of something that was no longer just a joint project between two or three artists, but an entire school of painters, a *colonie*. He expressed his absolute conviction that Gauguin would love Provençal nature and the same subjects that he did. In any event, living alone was living like a criminal. He invited his sister Wil to come and pay him a visit when Gauguin had moved in with him. He announced that he was going to travel on foot across Provence along with his friend, and that they would walk on the Canebière, in Marseille. On this occasion, Van Gogh would dress up as the Marseille painter Monticelli, whom he admired greatly.

Vincent may already have thought of all this, but Gauguin had not yet even indicated clearly that he would come. To anyone who could read between the lines, it was perfectly obvious that Gauguin was extremely hesitant about undertaking the journey: he knew Vincent, and he knew that his stay was not going to be a rest cure.

However, the French painter felt that his current situation was unworthy of his talent. He wrote to Vincent, saying that they must unite if they wanted their works to obtain the recognition they deserved. Van Gogh then believed – rightly – that

Gauguin, had no choice but to join him, backed into a corner as he was by debts and bad health; consequently, Vincent envisaged several years of shared living so that together they could continue the work begun by Monticelli. Bernard wrote that he would also like to come, with Laval and Moret, two other painters. This piece of good news fired up Van Gogh's enthusiasm still further. However, the group was now too big to manage without a leader: and naturally that leader could not be anyone but Gauguin, the greatest, most intelligent, most respected, most talented and most experienced artist among them.

It was at that moment that the Atelier du Midi was born. To begin with, the plan involved four or five people. It was a plan dreamed up by Van Gogh, who interpreted signs of kindness towards him, and his friends' fanciful resolutions, as tangible factors, constituting a future reality. The Yellow House never saw the realization of this plan, and the few weeks Van Gogh spent with Gauguin cannot really claim the title of *Studio of the South*.²⁸⁵ Van Gogh declared that Gauguin must come as quickly as possible, co-write an article with him in a local newspaper, and meet the *Félibres*, the poets of the Midi. Even Seurat might join them:

Ah, my dear brother, if I could do such a thing, or if Gauguin and I together could do such things that Seurat would join us!

But in my opinion, at the very least we must reckon his large paintings of the poseuses and the Grande Jatte but – let's see – at 5,000 each, shall we say... Ah well, if we were to join together, Gauguin and I should each also be capable of a nominal contribution of 10 thousand.

Once again that falls right in line with what I was telling you, that I wished absolutely absolutely to do 10 thousand francs worth of painting for the house. Well, it's funny, although I don't calculate in figures but in feelings, I so often happen upon the same results while starting from totally divergent stand-points.

I daren't dream about it, I daren't say any more about this Seurat partnership. First I must try to get to know Gauguin better. With whom one can't go wrong, no matter what. [710]

The reality, alas, was quite different. There was never any question of Seurat coming; it was just one illusion among a thousand others. When Gauguin finally arrived in Arles, one of the first things he noticed was that Arles was the dirtiest place in the Midi. He did not like the surrounding landscapes at all, and liked the countryside he explored even less. Against all expectations, Van Gogh agreed with his remarks!

I did know that Gauguin had travelled, but I didn't know he was a real seaman; he's been through all the difficulties, he was a real topman on the topmast and

a real sailor. That gives me a tremendous respect for him, and an even more absolute confidence in his personality. He has – if he's to be compared with something – links with those Iceland fishermen of Loti's. I believe that it'll make the same impression on you as on me.

Now we've done some work already, of course; he has a negress on the go, and a big landscape of this region.

What he tells me about Brittany is very interesting, and Pont-Aven is a quite amazing part of the world. Of course, everything there is better, bigger, more beautiful than here. Of a more solemn character, and above all more of a whole and more defined than the small, stunted, scorched countryside of Provence. [714]

The two months they spent together were the complete opposite of what Van Gogh had imagined. The Loti-style character, the lover of Provence, the sailor friend and cook must have remained in Brittany and sent someone else in his place. The man with whom Van Gogh shared the Yellow House was nothing like the idea he had built up of him. They did not get on. They did not travel on foot across Provence. They did not go to Marseille to walk on the Canebière. Bernard, Laval, Moret and Seurat never came to join them. However, this disillusionment did not diminish Van Gogh's tendency to build castles in the air, nor to live an artistic life. Quite the contrary. Gauguin, who also had a gift for the illusory, encouraged his friend to dream and imagine more and more ... on an artistic level. However, for Van Gogh, the artistic level did not exist as an independent part of his existence.

I've been working on two canvases.

A reminiscence of our garden at Etten with cabbages, cypresses, dahlias and figures [ill. 27]. Then a Woman reading a novel in a library like the Lecture Française [ill. 1]. A completely green woman.

Gauguin gives me courage to imagine, and the things of the imagination do indeed take on a more mysterious character. [719]

So the Midi, which could no longer represent success after Gauguin's negative remarks, passed from the status of goal to that of a mere stage; the dream of the Midi was shattered, but was immediately replaced by an even madder dream:

What Gauguin has to say about the tropics seems wonderful to me. There, certainly, is the future of a great renaissance of painting. Just ask your new Dutch friends if they've ever thought how interesting it would be if a few Dutch painters were to found a colourist school in Java. If they heard Gauguin describe the hot countries they'd certainly feel like doing that straightaway.



27. Vincent van Gogh,
*Reminiscence of the garden at
 Etten*; sketch in a letter from
 Vincent to his sister Wil,
 16 November 1888 [720].
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam;
 F - JH 1631

Not everyone is free and in a position to be able to emigrate. But what things there would be to do!

I regret not being ten or twenty years younger; I'd certainly go.

Now not very likely that I'll move from the coast, and the little yellow house here in Arles will remain what it is, a halfway house between Africa and the tropics and the people of the north. [714]

Basically, Gauguin only encouraged Vincent to let go of reality even more. Among other things he would paint 'from memory' his *Reminiscence of the garden at Etten*, mentioned above, and about which he would say in a letter to Wil: 'There you are, I know it isn't perhaps much of a resemblance, but for me it conveys the poetic character and the style of the garden as I feel them.' [720]

Consequently, during Gauguin's stay Vincent's paintings distanced themselves from reality, just as his programme of reading did. His dive into *la vie artiste* became ever more vertiginous. Several times, he told Theo that he was sailing in

dangerous waters: he alternated between attacks of creative fever and 'stupefaction'. At the same time, he often decided to loaf around in the brothels, where at least it is certain that he did not rest. His discussions with Gauguin were 'excessively electric' [726]. On 23 December, the drama occurred: Van Gogh lost his mind, cut off part of his ear, and provoked a tremendous scandal by handing this piece of flesh to a prostitute in a brothel he was in the habit of frequenting.

Within the framework of this study, it is futile to speculate on the medical peculiarities of Van Gogh's madness. It is certain that he had a problem with psychological balance, a vast and hazy subject about which myriad authors have poured forth their opinions. This study will not therefore attempt to explain the causes of his mental attacks, nor comment on their mechanisms. Nevertheless, when Van Gogh's mind wandered, what he saw was in part essentially literary, and this aspect merits a detour, since it enables us to see how deeply rooted literature was in the painter's mind. Thus, a month to the day after Gauguin's departure, Van Gogh wrote to him:

In my mental or nervous fever or madness, I don't know quite what to say or how to name it, my thoughts sailed over many seas. I even dreamed of the Dutch ghost ship and the Horla, and it seems that I sang then, I who can't sing on other occasions, to be precise an old wet-nurse's song while thinking of what the cradle-rocker sang as she rocked the sailors and whom I had sought in an arrangement of colours before falling ill. [739]

Concerning his painting of *La berceuse* (ill. 28), here referred to in the phrase 'arrangement of colours', he wrote to Theo:

On the subject of that canvas, I've just said to Gauguin that as he and I talked about the Icelandic fishermen and their melancholy isolation, exposed to all the dangers, alone on the sad sea, I've just said to Gauguin about it that, following these intimate conversations, the idea came to me to paint such a picture that sailors, at once children and martyrs, seeing it in the cabin of a boat of Icelandic fishermen, would experience a feeling of being rocked, reminding them of their own lullabies. [743]

Van Gogh may never have met any Icelandic fishermen. On the other hand, it is certain that he knew about them through *Pêcheur d'Islande*, Pierre Loti's novel, and perhaps through *Les travailleurs de la mer* by Victor Hugo. These two novels certainly inspired him to feel compassion for these sailors, exposed to a thousand dangers, isolated on the immense sea, a theme to which Vincent had always been sensitive. Van Gogh also 'dreamed of the Dutch ghost ship and the Horla' [739]. First, he refers here to the legend of the 'Flying Dutchman', whose origins are

obscure, and which was recorded in poetry by Heinrich Heine in 1830 and set to music by Richard Wagner in 1843. Van Gogh had read Heine with great interest in his youth, as the poems copied out in the *Poetry Albums* testify.²⁸⁶ Lastly, Vincent refers to a short story by Maupassant, 'Le Horla', a tale in which the real and the fantastical are mingled in a masterly composition about madness. Since Van Gogh was caught up in delirious visions, it is impossible to analyze correctly how and why he made these specific references. But considering his literary panorama as a whole, these three references come closest to expressing a total loss of control over a given situation, and the anxiety this arouses. The Faustian motif of Heine's captain, who challenges God in the middle of the storm, resembles the effort which Van Gogh made as he battled the effects of the sun and the mistral: an effort to hold fast to his profound beliefs, in the face of reason; Van Gogh deliberately took risks with his health, as the captain of the Flying Dutchman deliberately risked his soul. In 'Le Horla', the main character falls victim to a form of madness which takes hold of him progressively. In this he resembles Van Gogh, who was to some extent aware of the signs of mental imbalance that were present in him before his attack. In *Pêcheur d'Islande* and *Les travailleurs de la mer*, danger is everywhere, as is a paradoxical nostalgia for terra firma, creating an unconscious metaphor for Van Gogh's own situation: he was navigating by sight through artistic life, but was nostalgic for *real life* ... at the same time knowing that he could not exercise his profession in real life, just as a fisherman cannot exercise his by remaining on dry land.

Vincent ended his letter to Gauguin of 21 January 1889 by asking if he had – finally – read *Uncle Tom's cabin* by Beecher Stowe, *Germinie Lacerteux* by the Goncourts, and *Tartarin de Tarascon*. He added: 'The imagination of the south creates pals, doesn't it, and between us we always have friendship' [739]. Two very meaningful elements emerge from these remarks: first of all, these three books sum up Van Gogh's secular reading programme over the previous ten years (one socially committed book, a 'modern Gospel'; one 'modern French' book crafted in the realist, even Naturalist style in Vincent's eyes; lastly, one whimsical book, in which the author's imagination takes priority over plausibility, and whose interest is mainly comic). Just as he did with Theo, Vincent started from the principle that Gauguin could understand certain things if only he would consent to feed his mind with the same books; the works cited by Van Gogh are designed to become *common ground* for the two artists, which would facilitate their mutual understanding. The second vital element of this postscript is 'the imagination of the south creates pals': Van Gogh and Gauguin are not friends, but they can *imagine* that they are. Van Gogh suggested to Gauguin that they forget what had happened between them, clear all debts of friendship and hostility, and that they should meet up, as friends, in an imaginary world. Whether intentionally or not, this imaginary world was the world of correspondence: a medium that was literary, verifiable and



28. Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of Augustine Roulin (La berceuse)*, 1888.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo; F 504 JH 1655

controllable, despite rages and attacks of mental fever. Pushing verification even further, Vincent sent the drafts of his letters to Theo, to have them validated before they were sent to Gauguin: a filter which was necessary so that the ‘friendship’ between these two men could be healed of its wounds. And it worked, if only in Vincent’s head, for as far as Gauguin was concerned, his cutting remarks of 1903 bear witness to a rather vile hypocrisy on the subject.²⁸⁷

Starry night

After the attack in December, Van Gogh’s literary frame of reference changed. Before his mental breakdown, the painter had been able to illustrate his desire to escape from reality, his points of view and artistic emotions, with references to Loti, Maupassant and Voltaire; now, it seemed that the dizzy intoxication he had



29. Vincent van Gogh, *Starry night*, 1889, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss bequest; F612 JH 1731

glimpsed, and which Gauguin encouraged him to seek, had finally sent Van Gogh back to the books of his youth: once he had been admitted to the asylum in Saint-Rémy, he again immersed himself in Shakespeare, Victor Hugo and Renan. This reading matter enabled him to take pleasure in reading texts he liked, without having to go back to the naturalists' reality, which was so 'lacking in consolation': now, escape was historical and reassuring. We must also take account of the fact that the institution's library may not have contained a very large number of contemporary books, and that Van Gogh certainly had to limit himself to what was at hand. As regards Shakespeare, he had to ask Theo to send him several volumes.

Van Gogh ceased to invent an impossible reality. He no longer painted anything whose point of departure was not nature, and whose 'feeling for nature' was not the source of interest. The 'abstractions' he experimented with when he was with Gauguin would not be followed up. One particularly famous painting perhaps represents a final, convulsive attempt to go beyond reality, and Van Gogh would soon regret having painted it: *Starry night* (ill. 29). A veritable flagship of Van Gogh's fleet, this universally praised painting was undoubtedly the realization of a plan which had been long in the making. A year before painting it, in June 1888, he wrote to Emile Bernard:

I don't hide from you that I don't detest the countryside – having been brought up there, snatches of memories from past times, yearnings for that infinite of which the Sower, the sheaf, are the symbols, still enchant me as before.

But when will I do the starry sky, then, that painting that's always on my mind? Alas, alas, it's just as our excellent pal Cyprien says, in 'En ménage' by J. K. Huysmans: the most beautiful paintings are those one dreams of while smoking a pipe in one's bed, but which one doesn't make. But it's a matter of attacking them nevertheless, however incompetent one may feel vis-à-vis the ineffable perfections of nature's glorious splendours. [628]

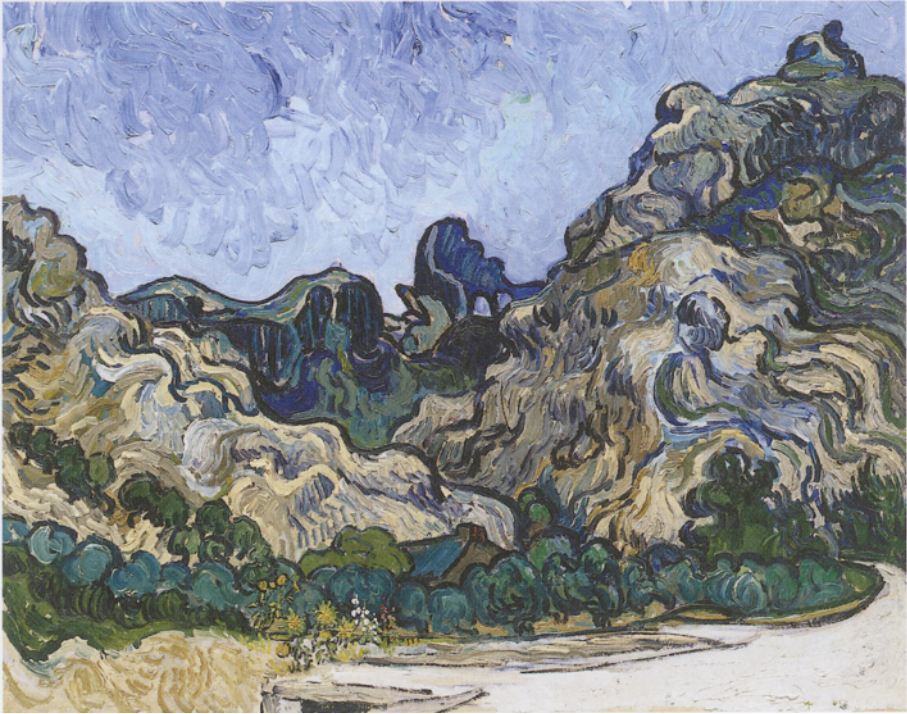
Van Gogh had already tackled the subject of the starry night in a less contorted version, *Starry night over the Rhône* (ill. 30), which undoubtedly corresponded much more closely to what he sought to achieve. For he did not like *Night study*, the name he gave to his Saint-Rémy work,²⁸⁸ which posterity has renamed. It 'lacked personal will'; the study said 'nothing' to him. This was not the painting he had dreamed of 'while smoking a pipe in one's bed'. After his self-mutilation, Van Gogh harshly criticized everything that was too far distanced from nature and the natural. The letter that contains this criticism also contains one of his rare negative critiques of a book: 'People will tell me that mountains aren't like that, and that there are black contours as wide as a finger. But anyway it seemed to me that it expressed the passage in Rod's book – one of the very rare passages



30. Vincent van Gogh, *Starry night over the Rhône*, 1888,
Musée d'Orsay, Paris; F 474 JH 1592

of his in which I find something good – on a lost land of dark mountains in which one noticed the darkish huts of goatherds, where sunflowers bloomed.’ [805]

This remark, which draws a parallel between a landscape described in *Le sens de la vie* by Edouard Rod and *Mountain landscape with black refuge (The Alpilles)* (ill. 31), is extremely important in more ways than one. First of all, Van Gogh had lost neither the habit of *seeing* nor the ability to *see* the books he read, outside any very specific theoretical framework. Next, Van Gogh extracted only one descriptive passage from Rod’s book, the rest of the book being regarded by the painter as the pretentious efforts of a tuberculosis sufferer. Such criticism was remarkable, as it was extremely rare. This was a book he was obliged to read because his sister Wil had asked him to do so, and it was natural that he would report back on it to Wil. However, he also talked about it to Theo, which he did not have to do at all. This detail indicates that Van Gogh was not content to *mention only* what he liked.



31. Vincent van Gogh, *Mountain landscape with black refuge (The Alpilles)*, 1889, The Solomon R.Guggenheim Museum, New York; F 622 JH 1766

He quite simply did not read what he did not like. In Saint-Rémy Van Gogh was resigned, he had reached his goal, and his canvases were liked by those whose opinions really mattered to him. Soon, an art critic would write an article highly praising his paintings in the *Mercure de France*. The painter freed himself from his literary framework, as he no longer had the need to justify, explain or illustrate what he was doing and thinking by resorting to the works of the great authors. He no longer needed the modern authors in order to dream, perhaps because he no longer dreamed.

The dream; the impossible picture; painting the stars which, he could easily imagine without really believing, might conceal other worlds where life could continue after death:²⁸⁹ all of this was behind him. So it was with the self-assurance of a mature, perhaps too mature, artist that he judged Rod's *Sens de la vie*, although he did had not aired his negative judgements before.

Truth and reality: this is what Van Gogh was now content with. This is what he came back to after the attack of dementia, which had resulted from an over-long period of intense effort, transporting him beyond reality, a journey that had overtaxed his strength. He had attained a summit, and knew that he was now handicapped, wounded. This did not disturb him: he was not at all important as a person. What mattered was the work that was accomplished:

Do you know what I think about quite often – what I used to say to you back in the old days, that if I didn't succeed I still thought that what I had worked on would be continued. Not directly, but one isn't alone in believing things that are true. And what does one matter as a person then? I feel so strongly that the story of people is like the story of wheat, if one isn't sown in the earth to germinate there, what does it matter, one is milled in order to become bread.

The difference between happiness and unhappiness, both are necessary and useful, and death or passing away... it's so relative – and so is life. [805]

The year spent in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, from May 1889 to May 1890, although rich in dramatic paintings, with an established, accomplished style, is an extremely poor hunting-ground in terms of literature. Van Gogh now read only authors he already knew, purely for his own pleasure, for his entertainment, and out of boredom. There would be virtually no more interaction between the texts he read and the pictures he painted; there would be no more passionate reflections, bold declarations of opinion cobbled together around misappropriated references. Van Gogh exhibited a tranquil assurance, and did not require anyone to teach him how to think. His intellectual framework had been acquired once and for all. With Emile Bernard he would again talk about the Bible, about St Paul; to his sister Wil he would deliver a few reflections on Renan and Shakespeare, whom he compared to Rembrandt – another former enthusiasm – in a letter to Theo. He wrote to Wil:

I'm quite absorbed in reading the Shakespeare that Theo sent me here, where at last I'll have the calm necessary to do a little more difficult reading. I've first taken the kings series, of which I've already read Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V and a part of Henry VI – as these dramas were the most unfamiliar to me. Have you ever read King Lear? But anyway, I think I shan't urge you too much to read such dramatic books when I myself, returning from this reading, am always obliged to go and gaze at a blade of grass, a pine-tree branch, an ear of wheat, to calm myself. [785]

Vincent had exhaustively explored the literary question which used to preoccupy him so much. He welcomed the calm of the asylum in Saint-Rémy, where he

could relive the artistic emotions he had experienced earlier, with no goal but to appreciate the work for its own sake, and not in order to use it to demonstrate that his choices were correct. The strength of the emotions aroused by these renewed experiences was such that he had to refocus himself afterwards, by contemplating the simplest, most real things he could find: a blade of grass, the branch of a pine tree, an ear of wheat. He returned to the essentials, to simplicity, to the extraordinary force contained in a Rembrandt portrait, a character from Shakespeare, a sentence from Renan. A few days after this letter, Vincent wrote to Theo:

I enjoyed myself very much yesterday reading *Measure for measure*. Then I read Henry VIII, in which there are such beautiful passages, like the one about Buckingham, and Wolsey's words after his downfall.

I think I'm lucky to be able to read or re-read this at my leisure, and then I very much hope to read Homer at last. Outside the cicadas are singing fit to burst, a strident cry ten times louder than that of the crickets, and the scorched grass is taking on beautiful tones of old gold. And the beautiful towns of the south are in the state of our dead towns along the Zuyder Zee, which were formerly lively. While in the downfall and the decline of things, the cicadas dear to good old Socrates have remained. And here, certainly, they're still singing old Greek. [787]

Vincent van Gogh's literary Odyssey ended with Socrates, and with the intention – perhaps never realized – of reading Homer. The spring had run dry; Vincent undoubtedly read less, and if he did read, he no longer mentioned his reading matter. This silence, a disturbing prelude to his tragic end, showed that a year before he died from a bullet in the chest, the future painter of *Wheatfield with crows* (F 779 JH 2117) no longer had a taste for literary discovery or new ideas – although he undoubtedly remained sensitive to beautiful language.

He became less and less hesitant to use that beautiful language himself, with the assurance of the man who, when he was in Arles, still said: 'If myself I were to break myself down in the effort, it would mean absolutely nothing to me. I still have resources for that eventuality, because I would either go into the business or I would write, but as long as I'm in painting I see nothing but the association of several people, and the communal life.' [710]

The determination and the need to write, which were so manifest in Van Gogh that he unhesitatingly envisaged a career as an author, created a correspondence which is not only rich, but whose literary value, while unusual, is undeniable, and which constitutes an integral part of Van Gogh's artistic oeuvre. A unique document, his correspondence is a mine of information about his living conditions and his thoughts; it is also unquestionably a monumental, essential work of literature: the best and the most complete of Van Gogh's self-portraits.

Finally, it was perhaps Emile Bernard who best described the mechanism of the frequently thwarted influences upon Vincent, thus doing justice to his profoundly original personality:

He runs to Cormon's but becomes disgusted quite quickly, tries the complementary procedures of pointillism, which annoy him, and finally begins his free flight after his inspection of works by Monticelli, Manet, Gauguin, etc. Certainly, he owes nothing to any of them. Van Gogh is more personal than anyone. A lover of the Japanese, Indians and Chinese, of everything that sings, laughs and is vibrant, he found in the work of these innate artists the surprising techniques of his harmonies, the extraordinary flights of his drawing, as he found deep within himself the frenzied nightmares with which he constantly oppresses us ...²⁹⁰

Conclusion

Vincent van Gogh's literary journey was as one with his own life. His reading seemed to precede his choices and herald his decisions: his reading of religious works preceded his decision to become a pastor; he read a large number of Parisian novels before going to Paris; he amused himself with escapist literature before leaving for Arles. Finally, he stopped reading a year before he committed suicide, in Auvers-sur-Oise.

His reading faithfully reflected his preoccupations and his centres of interest; it contributed to fostering his reflections, and provided the support necessary to justify his most questionable acts. Literature seemed as important to him as painting. It shaped him, influenced him, and reassured him about his own originality. However, Van Gogh, a highly impervious individual with a critical sense that was forever on the alert, did not allow himself to be impressed by any text. His enthusiasm, which he cultivated, did not blind him. He attentively managed the influence which his favourite authors could have upon him. He loved rebels, stubborn people, clear actions, simple and virile writings. The books he read were the reflection of his own personality. Those that characterize him best were *Uncle Tom's cabin* by Beecher Stowe, *A Christmas carol* by Dickens, *Les misérables* by Victor Hugo, *Germinie Lacerteux* by the Goncourts, and lastly *Tartarin de Tarascon* by Daudet. Books that spoke to him of humanity, of ordinary daily life, and lastly of his dreams. The characters in these books were those he encountered and whom he loved. They were also characters with whom he identified: often alone against the world, oppressed, sensitive, touching and misunderstood.

Driven by the desire to make a vital contribution to the art of his time, while not laying claim to success or honours, Van Gogh derived from literature the strength to follow Renan's command, which had had an impact upon him when he was still only twenty years old: 'Man is not placed on the earth merely to be happy; nor is he placed here merely to be honest, he is here to accomplish great things through society, to arrive at nobleness, and to outgrow the vulgarity in which the existence of almost all individuals drags on.'²⁹¹

The goal was attained. He was happy only now and then, he was simple and honest, and he achieved great things. Like many of his other deep motivations, his rejection of ease was present even in his earliest letters and in the first books he mentioned. No author succeeded in making him change direction or goal, but the books he read often provided a shape for ideas that existed as seeds in his mind.

This study, the first devoted to all of Van Gogh's reading, shows that the painter's literary itinerary is a vital factor for anyone who wishes fully to understand his life and his work. This study is not exhaustive and does not claim to put forward definitive conclusions. Like all academic works, it will provoke reactions, certain aspects will be called into question and new information will come to light; and *deo volente*, it will play a part in enriching our knowledge about the life and work of Vincent van Gogh.

NOTES

Introduction

1. The author had the privilege of participating in the transcription of Van Gogh's French manuscripts within the framework of the preparation of a new critical edition of Van Gogh's complete correspondence, to be published in 2009.
2. Emile Bernard (ed.), 'Extraits de lettres de Vincent van Gogh à Emile Bernard', *Mercur de France* 7 (1893), pp. 333-39.
3. 'La publication de ses lettres à son frère Théodore et à Emile Bernard par le Mercur de France, des années 1893 à 1897, commença à le mettre en vue, mais elle apprenait seulement qu'il était doué d'un véritable talent littéraire et aucun changement n'était apporté ainsi dans la méconnaissance qu'on avait de l'artiste.' Théodore Duret, *Van Gogh, Vincent*, Paris 1916, pp. 96-97.
4. Emile Bernard (ed.), *Lettres de Vincent van Gogh à Emile Bernard*, Paris 1911.
5. 'Qu'importe donc si son style n'est pas correct, il est vivant, et notre indulgence y saura mettre sa délicate attention, comme lorsqu'il nous arrive de sentir des êtres supérieurs qui ne peuvent point parler notre langue. «N'est-ce pas plutôt l'intensité de la pensée que le calme de la touche que nous recherchons», m'écrivait-il. Ce qu'il a dit à propos de sa peinture, semblant en excuser à l'avance le débraillé et la fougue un peu folle, je l'applique à ses lettres. C'est la pensée qu'il y faut sentir, c'est la vraie vie qu'il y faut trouver. Le calme de la touche n'y est certes pas ; mais quelle intensité ! Et quelle joie elles nous donneront après tant de devoirs de style écrits par des gens qui n'ont rien à dire. L'ardeur n'a pas besoin de syntaxe ni de phrases quand elle atteint à l'ivresse morale de méditer et de créer.' Ibid., pp. 41-42.
6. 'accent' should not be taken literally in this sentence. In Emile Bernard (ed.), *Lettres à Emile Bernard*, Paris 1926, p. 16, Bernard writes that Van Gogh had only 'a slightly foreign accent'.
7. See Chris Stolwijk and Richard Thomson, exhib. cat. *Theo van Gogh 1857-1891: art dealer, collector and brother of Vincent*, Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) & Paris (Musée d'Orsay) 1999-2000. Tersteeg, as Vincent's manager at Goupil & Co. during his seven-year

apprenticeship, certainly played a large part in his intellectual development.

8. In this work, I use both 'Van Gogh' and 'Vincent' as seems appropriate. Albert Aurier, the first author to devote a publication to the work of Vincent van Gogh, wrote 'Van Gogh', which did not seem to bother the painter. However, Van Gogh expressed a wish to see only his Christian name used in a catalogue: 'And again, many thanks for all the initiatives you've taken for the Independents' exhibition, all in all I'm really pleased that they've put them with the other Impressionists. But – although this time it makes no difference at all – in future my name must be put in the catalogue the way I sign it on the canvases, i.e. Vincent and not Vangogh, for the excellent reason that people here wouldn't be able to pronounce that name.' [589]
9. A fuller description of these works can be found in Wouter van der Veen, *Van Gogh, man of letters* (diss.), Utrecht 2007, pp. 7-14.
10. Alfred H. Barr Jr. (ed.), exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh*, New York (Museum of Modern Art) 1935.
11. Carl Nordenfalk, 'Van Gogh and literature', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 10 (1947), p. 145. See p. 217.
12. Jean Seznec, 'Literary inspiration in Van Gogh', *Magazine of Art* 43 (December 1950), pp. 282-88.
13. Sven Lövgren, *The genesis of modernism: Seurat, Gauguin, van Gogh & French symbolism in the 1880's*, rev. ed., Bloomington, Ind., 1971.
14. According to Lövgren, Felix Holt's socially committed vision is Christian in origin, which would particularly have pleased Van Gogh. It seems to me, on the contrary, that Felix Holt demonstrates Eliot's atheism: there is no need to be a Christian in order to want the best for one's neighbour.
15. A.M. Hammacher, 'Van Gogh – Michelet – Zola', *Vincent. Bulletin of the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh* 4 (1975), no. 3, pp. 2-21.
16. Griselda Pollock, exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh in zijn Hollandse jaren: kijk op stad en land door Van Gogh en zijn tijdgenoten 1870-1890*, Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum Van Gogh) 1980-81. This period begins with Van Gogh's return to the Netherlands after his time in the Belgian Borinage and ends with his departure for Antwerp, the last stage before he finally settled in France.
17. See letter 133.

18. Evert van Uitert, *Vincent van Gogh in creative competition: four essays from Simiolus*, Zutphen 1983.
19. Jan Hulsker, *Vincent and Theo van Gogh: a dual biography*, ed. James M. Miller, Ann Arbor 1990.
20. Roland Dorn, *Décoration, Vincent van Goghs Werkreihe für das Gelbe Haus in Arles*, Hildesheim, Zürich & New York 1990. For the chronological list of authors and works mentioned and considered pertinent, see pp. 531-599. For an analysis of the example that Zola and Balzac represented to Van Gogh, see pp. 174-186.
21. Fieke Pabst and Evert van Uitert, 'A literary life, with a list of books and periodicals read by Van Gogh', in Evert van Uitert and Michael Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, pp. 68-84.
22. Tsukasa Ködera, *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity versus nature*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 1990.
23. Robert Rosenblum, 'Romantic survival and the revival in the late nineteenth century. Van Gogh', in *Modern painting and the northern romantic tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, London 1975, pp. 65-100.
24. A. Verkade-Bruining, *De God van Vincent. Beschouwingen over de mens Van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1989.
25. Kathleen Powers Erickson, *At eternity's gate: the spiritual vision of Vincent van Gogh*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge 1998, p. 43 (n. 19).
26. Philippe Dagen, 'Préface' to Vincent van Gogh, *Correspondance générale*, trans. Maurice Beerblock and Louis Roëlandt, Paris 1990.
27. Judy Sund, *True to temperament: Van Gogh and French naturalist literature*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992.
28. Douglas Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, exhib. cat. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*, Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago) & Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2001-2. The subject of Van Gogh and literature is discussed on pp. 16-22, 30-40, 90-93, 97-102, 110-111, 124-128, 142-151.
29. See, for example, p. 33. The quotation from *Télémaque* differs considerably from the original text.
30. In this study, all Van Gogh's original texts are given in the English translation prepared for the forthcoming publication of *Vincent van Gogh – The Letters*.

1. Early letters

31. Fieke Pabst (ed.), *Vincent van Gogh's Poetry Albums* (Cahier Vincent 1), Amsterdam & Zwolle, 1988.
32. Annie Slade-Jones was the wife of the Reverend Thomas Slade-Jones (1829-1883), who employed Vincent van Gogh as a tutor and vice-sacristan in 1876.
33. A further album, composed for one of the artist's sisters, was published in Louis van Tilborgh and Fieke Pabst, 'Notes on a donation: the poetry album for Elisabeth Huberta van Gogh', *Van Gogh Museum Journal* 1995, pp. 87-101. In the context of the albums put together for Theo, this one shows no particular originality of either content or form.
34. The text was first published in Pabst (ed.), *Van Gogh's Poetry Albums*, pp. 84-87. Contrary to the statement by Pabst and Tilborgh ('Notes on a donation', p. 91), several elements exclude the possibility that Van Gogh could have found this text in the work of another author: for example, the errors in the French of 'sa maladie de poitrine s'aggrave' ('his chest problem became worse') or 'Il partit donc, malade jusqu'à la mort' ('And so he left [...] deathly ill'), a literal translation from the Dutch 'doodziek', are too obvious to have passed through the editorial net; finally, his statement that Granville is in Brittany rather than Normandy.
35. Jules Breton, 'Le soir', *Les champs et la mer*, in *Œuvres poétiques de Jules Breton (1867-1886)*, Paris 1887, p. 34.
 Dans la lumière, au loin, des touffes d'émeraude
 Vous laissent deviner la ligne des champs
 blonds,
 Et le ciel enflammé d'une teinte si chaude,
 Et le soleil tombé qui tremble dans les joncs.

 Et dans mon âme émue, alors, quand je compare
 L'humilité du site à sa sublimité,
 Un délire sacré de mon esprit s'empare,
 Et j'entrevois la main de la divinité.
- Ce n'est rien et c'est tout. En créant la nature
 Dieu répandit partout la splendeur de l'effet ;
 Aux petits des oiseaux s'il donne la pâture,
 Il prodigue le beau, ce suprême bienfait.
36. See Leo Jansen, 'Literatuur als leidraad: Vincent van Gogh als lezer', *Literatuur* 20 (2003), no. 1 (February), p. 21.
37. Pastor Van Gogh belonged to the liberal

evangelical Groningen school, which was also dedicated to social causes.

38. See Kôdera, *Christianity versus nature*, pp. 15-16.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19

40. See Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, 'Memoir of Vincent van Gogh', in *The complete letters of Vincent van Gogh*, ed. J. van Gogh-Bonger and V. W. van Gogh, 3 vols., London 1958, vol. 1, pp. xv-liii.

41. See Stolwijk and Thomson, exhib. cat. *Theo van Gogh*.

42. See Jan Hulsker, 'What Theo really thought of Vincent', *Vincent. Bulletin of the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh* 3 (1974), no. 2, pp. 2-28.

43. See Hans Luijten, "'Rummaging among my woodcuts'—Van Gogh and the graphic arts", in exhib. cat. *Vincent's choice: the musée imaginaire of Van Gogh*, ed. Chris Stolwijk et al., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2003, pp. 99-112.

44. Joseph Autran, 'L'héritier présomptif', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2: *La vie rurale*, Paris 1875, p. 115.

Sois prudent: la sagesse est la plus sûre garde!
Pour semer le sillon, choisis l'heure et le vent.
Rarement fructifie un grain que l'on hasarde,
Et, comme, l'espérance, il avorte souvent.

Be prudent: wisdom is the surest protection!
To sow the furrow, choose the hour and the wind.

A grain cast at random rarely bears fruit,
And, like hope, it often fails to ripen.

45. See p. 184.

46. 'Sainte-Beuve said, "There is in most men a poet who died young, whom the man survived."' [38]

47. Jacques Brosse (ed.), *Dictionnaire biographique des auteurs*, vol. 3, Paris 1988, p. 382.

48. Jules Michelet, *La mer* (1861); trans. W.H. Davenport Adams as *The sea*, London 1875, p. 27. 'J'aimais cette petite ville singulière et un peu triste qui vit de la pêche lointaine la plus dangereuse.'

49. See pp. 217f.

50. For the importance of nature within the movement to which Pastor Van Gogh belonged, see Kôdera, *Christianity versus nature*, pp. 22-26.

51. Jules Michelet, *L'oiseau* (1856); trans. A.E. as *The bird*, London 1868, pp. 282-3, 283-4. 'L'alouette a le génie lyrique ; le rossignol a l'épopée, le drame, le combat intérieur: de là une

lumière à part. En pleines ténèbres, il voit dans son âme et dans l'amour ; par moments, au delà, ce semble, de l'amour individuel, dans l'océan de l'amour infini.

'Comment ne pas l'appeler artiste ? Il en a le tempérament au degré suprême où l'homme l'a lui-même rarement. Tout ce qui y tient, qualités, défauts, en lui surabonde. Il est sauvage et craintif, défiant, mais point du tout rusé. Il ne consulte point sa sûreté et ne voyage que seul. Il est ardemment jaloux, en émulation égal au pinson.

"Il se crèverait à chanter," dit un de ses historiens. Il s'écoute, il s'établit surtout où il y a écho, pour entendre et répondre. Nerveux à l'excès, on le voit, en captivité, tantôt dormir longtemps le jour avec des rêves agités, parfois se débattre, veiller et se démenner. Il est sujet aux attaques de nerfs, à l'épilepsie. [...]

'L'amour et la lumière sont sans doute son point de départ ; mais l'art même, l'amour du beau, confusément entrevus et très-vivement sentis, sont un second aliment qui soutient son cœur et lui donne un souffle nouveau. Et cela est sans limites, un jour ouvert sur l'infini.

'La vraie grandeur de l'artiste, c'est de dépasser son objet, et de faire plus qu'il ne veut, et tout autre chose, de passer par-dessus le but, de traverser le possible, et de voir encore au delà. De là de grandes tristesses, une source intarissable de mélancolie ; de là le ridicule sublime de pleurer les malheurs qu'il n'a jamais eus. Les autres oiseaux s'en étonnent et lui demandent parfois ce qu'il a, ce qu'il regrette. Heureux, libre en sa forêt, il ne leur répond pas moins par ce que, dans son silence, chantait mon captif: "La Liberté ! lascia ch'io pianga !" (Van Gogh translated the final words in Italian into French.)

52. See pp. 81f.

53. Pabst (ed.), *Van Gogh's Poetry Albums*, p. 19.

54. See letter 635.

55. Pabst (ed.), *Van Gogh's Poetry Albums*, p. 38. There are no grounds for stating that this album, after being put together, was not lent or bestowed for any other purpose than as a gift.

56. 'Si la joie des autres aigrit les cœurs jaloux, elle fortifie les cœurs soumis, c'est le rayon de soleil qui fait épanouir ces deux belles fleurs qu'on nomme la confiance et l'espoir.'

57. Cf. François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, *Les aventures de Télémaque*, ed. Jacques Le Brun, Paris 1995, pp. 399, 405-406.

58. Cf. Debora Silverman, 'Pilgrim's Progress and Vincent van Gogh's métier', in exhib. cat. *Van Gogh in England: portrait of the artist as a young man*, ed. Martin Bailey, London (Barbican Art Gallery) 1992, pp. 95-115.

59. 'A book by Bunyan tells of a traveller who sees a lion lying at the side of the road he must traverse – and yet he continues on his way – there is nothing else he may or can do – and when he arrives at the place he notices that the lion is chained up and is only there to test the travellers' courage. Thus it is in life more than once. There is much in store for us, but others have lived, and so whosoever loves his parents must follow them on life's path.' [117]

60. See letter 133.

61. 'On n'aurait qu'une idée bien faible et bien incomplète du sacrifice de la Croix, si l'on n'y voyait que ce qui paraît, pour ainsi dire, aux sens. Jésus-Christ a offert non seulement son corps sacré, en proie à toutes les souffrances et toutes les angoisses que peut endurer la nature humaine, mais encore son âme sainte étroitement unie au Verbe divin, toutes ses douleurs, toutes ses affections, toutes ses volontés, et l'agonie et le délaissement qui tira de son cœur ce dernier cri: *Mon Père, pourquoi m'avez-vous abandonné?* En cet état, il représentait l'humanité entière condamnée à mourir; et l'homme, en effet, fut frappé de mort jusque dans les plus secrètes profondeurs de son être. Alors, *tout fut consommé*, et le supplice et la rédemption.

'Or, chaque fois que le prêtre, montant à l'autel, y renouvelle, selon l'institution divine, cet ineffable sacrifice; chaque fois que le fidèle participe à la victime immolée, et le fidèle, et le prêtre doivent s'offrir ainsi que Jésus-Christ s'est offert lui-même; leur sacrifice uni au sien doit être comme le sien, sans réserve; car, nous aussi, nous sommes attachés à la Croix, et avec Jésus-Christ et en Jésus-Christ, nous souffrons pour nous, pour nos frères, pour les vivants, pour les morts, pour toute la grande famille humaine: ce qui fait dire à l'apôtre saint Paul ces étonnantes paroles: *Je me réjouis de mes souffrances à cause de vous: et ce qui manque à la Passion de Jésus-Christ, je l'accomplis en ma chair, pour son corps, qui est l'Eglise*: non sans doute que la Passion du Sauveur ne fût plus que surabondante pour ôter le péché du monde, et satisfaire à la justice de Dieu, mais parce que chacun de nous doit la reproduire en soi, et parce que, *étant les membres*

d'un seul corps qui est le corps du Christ, tout ce que nous souffrons, il le souffre avec nous, de sorte que nos souffrances deviennent comme une partie de sa Passion propre.

'O Jésus! je m'offre avec vous, je m'offre tout entier; me voilà sur l'autel: frappez, Seigneur, achevez le sacrifice: détruisez tout ce qui en moi est de l'homme condamné, ces désirs de la terre, ces affections, ces volontés, ces sens qui me troublent, ce corps de péché, et, les yeux fixés sur votre Croix, je dirai: *Tout est consommé!*'

62. Journalist and art critic (1807-1869). Trained as a lawyer, he took part in the 1830 revolution, which prompted him to join the battle fought by the democratic movement. One of the most ardent supporters of the 1848 revolution, he was offered the post of director of fine arts the day after the victory, but he declined this offer in order to devote himself to editing the newspaper *La Vraie République*, which he founded in March 1849 and one of whose contributors was George Sand. Convicted in May of the same year for his revolutionary activities, he went into exile in Brussels. It was during this period that he adopted the pseudonym William Bürger (citizen). As an art critic, he took up Diderot's torch, and defended French landscape and realism in art. But the originality of his critical work is entirely secondary to his rediscovery of Vermeer during his years of exile, which to a large extent he devoted to shedding light on the mystery of the man he nicknamed the 'Sphinx of Delft'. See Agora dictionary (http://agora.qc.ca/mot.nsf/Dossiers/William_Burger).

63. See letter 459.

64. William Bürger (pseudonym of Théophile Thoré), *Musées de la Hollande*, Paris 1858, p. 326. 'L'art hollandais, avec son *naturalisme* comme on se plaît à dire, est donc unique dans l'Europe moderne. C'est l'indication d'un art inspiré tout autrement que l'art mystique du Moyen-âge, que l'art allégorique et aristocratique de la Renaissance, toujours continuée par l'art contemporain. L'art de Rembrandt et des Hollandais, c'est tout simplement L'ART POUR L'HOMME.'

65. Eugène Fromentin, *Les maîtres d'autrefois, Belgique – Hollande* (1876); trans. as *The masters of past time, or criticism on the old Flemish & Dutch painters*, London 1913, p. 132. 'Le moment est venu de penser moins, de viser moins haut, de regarder de plus près, d'observer mieux et de peindre aussi bien, mais autrement. C'est

la peinture de la foule, du citoyen, de l'homme de travail, du parvenu et du premier venu, entièrement faite pour lui, faite de lui. Il s'agit de devenir humble pour les choses humbles, petit pour les petites choses, subtil pour les choses subtiles, de les accueillir toutes sans omission ni dédain, d'entrer familièrement dans leur intimité, affectueusement dans leur manière d'être; c'est affaire de sympathie, de curiosité attentive et de patience.'

2. Body and soul

66. Cf. 'You'll see from the little portrait of myself that I include [F 525 JH 1665] that although I saw Paris, London and so many other large cities, and that for years at a time, I still look more or less like a peasant from Zundert, Toon or Piet Prins, say, and I sometimes imagine that I feel and think like that too, only the peasants are of more use in the world. It's only when they have all the rest that people get a feeling for, need for paintings, books etc. So in my own estimation I definitely reckon myself below the peasants. Anyway, I plough on my canvases as they do in their fields.' [811]

67. Luke 11: 34.

68. Stil glimlachende zag de Schilder, van achter de heesters
Over de hobb'ligen baen het getier traeg verder
zich sling'ren.
'Ja, – zoo mompelde hij – ja 't moet den Heere
Lieflijk klinken, het blijde gejuich waarmede die
herten,

Zoo eenvoudig hun dank uitstorten bij
't zaemlen der laatste
Vruchten, die hij elk jaar volop uit hun zwoegen
laet rijpen.

Ja, want het schoonste gebed van eenvoud en
onschuld is vreugde !'

69. Cf. Matthew 6: 22; Luke 11: 24.

70. Pabst and Van Uiter, 'A Literary Life'.

71. Cf. p. 178.

72. Emile Souvestre, *Un philosophe sous les toits*,
journal d'un homme heureux, Paris 1850; trans. as
*An attic philosopher in Paris: or, a peep at the world
from a garret being the journal of a happy man*,
London 1853, pp. 108-9.

73. 2 Corinthians 6: 10.

74. See p. 47.

75. Chris Stolk, 'Van Gogh's nature', in exhib.

cat. *Vincent's choice*, p. 26.

76. See pp. 21ff.

77. Edmond Roche, *Poésies posthumes*, Paris 1863, pp. 48-50: 'La dune'.

J'ai gravi triste & seul, la dune triste & nue,
Où la mer fait gémir sa plainte continue,
La dune où vient mourir la vague aux larges plis
Monotone sentier aux tortueux replis.

78. Lines 1-2 and 9-11 of 'Calais (fragment)'
(ibid., pp. 67-68).

Que j'aime à te revoir, o ma ville natale,
Chère nymphe marine assise au bord des eaux!
J'aime de ton beffroi la flèche qui s'élance,
Belle de hardiesse & belle d'élégance,
Et sa coupole à jour qui laisse voir les cieux.

79. Kôdera, *Christianity versus nature*; Druick
and Zegers, exhib. cat. *The Studio of the South*.

80. Edmond Roche, *Poésies posthumes*, p. 134.

Silence! L'enfant dort!... Sur ses lèvres vermeilles
Son sourire divin est à peine effacé;
Des songes enchanteurs aux divines merveilles
L'essaim mystérieux sur son front a glissé.

A quoi peux-tu penser ainsi, quand tu
sommeilles,
Cœur d'or où nul souci désastreux n'a passé?
A quoi peux-tu penser? A ta mère qui veille,
Et dont le tendre chant a tout-à-coup cessé.

Dors, petit chérubin, ange aux paupières closes;
Jouis en ce moment du calme où tu reposes
Sans remords inquiet, sans chagrin étouffant!

Hélas! trop tôt pour toi l'amour et le génie
Te feront éprouver leur brûlante insomnie,
Et tu regretteras ton doux sommeil d'enfant.

81. This summary is by its very nature
selective; doubtless, elements that may appear
important to some readers may have been
omitted. The reader is invited to consult letter
104 in its entirety. Apart from the obvious
advantages of reading the source material, this
also emphasizes just how long the prayer is,
a fact that in itself signifies the future painter's
extreme zeal. No account has been taken of the
extracts from the Psalms which punctuate the
prayer, as their themes are already expressed in
Van Gogh's text.

82. 2 Corinthians 6: 10. Paul's epistles
represent a large part of the biblical quotations
encountered in Van Gogh's correspondence.
As these epistles are essentially advice, they
served Van Gogh both as a devotional handbook

and a guide. His attachment to this particular verse is fundamental to his attitude as a young zealot; it gave him the strength he needed to confront the difficulties he faced. This attitude anticipated that which the painter would have in Arles, in 1888, when he would always attempt to meet annoyances with good humour – with the frequent aid of references to Voltaire's *Candide* and Daudet's *Tartarin de Tarascon*.

83. Ernest Renan, *Études d'histoire religieuse*, Paris 1857, p. 121.

'Pour agir dans le monde, il faut mourir à soi-même. Le peuple qui se fait le missionnaire d'une pensée religieuse n'a plus d'autre patrie que cette pensée.'

'L'homme n'est pas ici-bas seulement pour être heureux, il n'y est même pas pour être simplement honnête. Il y est pour réaliser de grandes choses par la société, pour arriver à la noblesse et dépasser la vulgarité où se traîne l'existence de presque tous les individus.'

84 This expression, which Van Gogh uses several times, appears in Paul Mantz's introduction to Alfred Sensier, *La vie et l'œuvre de J.-F. Millet*, Paris 1881, p. vi; trans. (abridged) Helena de Kay as *Jean-François Millet: peasant and painter*, Boston 1881, p. viii.

85. From Hymn no. 265 by Horatius Bonar, in *Hymns of faith and hope* (1857).

86. From the poem 'Up-hill' by the English poet Christina Rossetti. Van Gogh was fascinated by a picture by the American painter George Boughton, *The pilgrim's progress*, to which he attached this verse, together with its leitmotiv 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing', and lastly the *Pilgrim's progress from this world to that which is to come* by John Bunyan, thus finding an artistic and literary form for one of the dominant ideas in his religious period (1875-1880).

87. Alfred de Musset, 'La nuit d'octobre', *Poésies*, 1836.

L'homme est un apprenti, la douleur est son maître

Et nul ne se connaît tant qu'il n'a pas souffert.

88. See letter 109.

89. 2 Corinthians 6: 10.

3. The Imitation of Jesus Christ

90. The poem (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 23-25) was published for the first time in the *The Knickerbocker* in 1838.

91. For the theme of consolation, see Leo Jansen, 'Vincent van Gogh's belief in art as consolation', in exhib. cat. *Vincent's choice*, pp. 13-24.

92. Voltaire, *Zadig, ou la destinée*, ed. Loïc Marcou, Paris 1996, p. 141.

93. See letter 739.

94. For the stylistic influence of authors such as Michelet, Zola, Daudet and Voltaire in the letters of Van Gogh, see Wouter van der Veen, "'En tant que quant à moi'", Van Gogh and the French language', *Van Gogh Museum Journal* 2002, pp. 64-77.

95. Sund, pp. 14-21.

96. Matthew 11: 29-30.

97. Luke 9: 23.

98. Verkade-Bruining, p. 14.

99. Thomas à Kempis, *The imitation of Christ* (c. 1418), trans. Leo Sherley-Price, Harmondsworth 1986, p. 84 (II, XII, 1).

100. Ibid., p. 86 (II, XII, 7-8).

101. See letter 49.

102. See p. 115.

103. See pp. 88f.

104. 1 Thessalonians 5: 11.

105. John 12: 24.

106. John 12: 35.

4. Rebellion, suffering and sentiment

107. See letter 613; cf. p. 64.

108. For this episode, see: Hulsker, *Vincent and Theo van Gogh*, pp. 133-134.

109. See letter 158.

110. Thomas Carlyle, *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history*, lecture I (5 May 1840): 'The hero as divinity. Odin. Paganism: Scandinavian mythology'.

111. Sund, p. 37.

112. *The imitation of Christ*, pp. 212-13 (IV, XV, 3-4).

113. Sensier, p. 101-2 (English ed., p. 72). 'Je ne suis pas philosophe, je ne veux pas supprimer la douleur, ni trouver une formule qui me rende stoïque et indifférent. La douleur est, peut-être, ce qui fait le plus fortement exprimer les artistes.'

114. *The imitation of Christ*, p. 84 (II, XI, 5).

115. Ibid.

116. Cornelis Marinus Van Gogh, an art dealer, brother of Pastor Theodorus Van Gogh.

117. Souvestre, p. vii. 'Nous connaissons

un homme qui, au milieu de la fièvre de changement et d'ambition qui travaille notre société, a continué d'accepter, sans révolte, son humble rôle dans le monde, et a conservé, pour ainsi dire, le goût de la pauvreté.'

118. Ibid., p. 90. 'Brave fils et digne mère! comme de tels exemples ramènent à l'amour du genre humain! Dans un accès de fantaisie misanthropique, on peut envier le sort du sauvage et préférer les oiseaux à ses pareils; mais l'observation impartiale fait bien vite justice de tels paradoxes. A l'examen, on trouve que, dans cette humanité mêlée de bien et de mal le mal est assez abondant pour que l'habitude nous empêche d'y prendre garde, tandis que le bien nous frappe précisément par son exception. Si rien n'est parfait, rien non plus n'est mauvais sans compensation ou sans ressource. Que de richesses d'âme au milieu des misères de la société! comme le monde moral y rachète le monde matériel! Ce qui distinguera à jamais le monde du reste de la création, c'est cette faculté des affections choisies et des sacrifices continués. [...] Ainsi le sentiment fait à notre espèce une existence à part dans le monde; grâce à lui, nous jouissons d'une sorte d'immortalité terrestre, et, quand les autres êtres se succèdent, l'homme est le seul qui se continue.' (chapter 8).

119. See p. 43.

120. See letter 152.

121. Van Gogh read numerous periodicals, including the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. However, it is impossible to state that he actually read and remembered the passages cited here. These examples serve only to illustrate the way in which the word 'sentiment' was used by recognized authors.

122. Théophile Thoré, 'Hobbema', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 4 (October-December 1859), p. 29. 'Chez qui [Hobbema] a-t-il étudié ? chez Salomon Ruijsdael ? Mais quoi ! on ne sait presque rien de Salomon lui-même. Après de Jacob Ruijsdael ? Ils ont dû se connaître, assurément. Ils ont peint parfois les mêmes sites, et leur pratique a de certaines analogies ; leur sentiment, aussi.'

123. Ibid., p. 41. 'Pour qui connaît bien Hobbema, ce qui frappe surtout le regard comme signe de reconnaissance, après le sentiment mystérieux et intime de la nature, après la touche perlée [...], c'est une qualité de couleur incomparable.'

124. Sund, p. 46.

125. Ibid.

126. See pp. 194-95.

127. See letter 153.

128. Francis Bacon, *Descriptio globi intellectualis* (Works, ed. James Spedding, London 1887, vol. 3, p. 731).

5. Strategic reading

129. Pollock, p. 91.

130. See letter 132.

131. See letters 288 and 294.

132. See letter 356.

133. See letter 560.

134. See the preface to *Pierre et Jean* (cf. n. 126).

135. Jules Michelet, *L'amour* (1858); trans. J.W. Palmer as *Love*, New York 1860, pp. 297-98.

'I see yonder a lady (the one whom this book found in her youth, and has accompanied to her declining age), walking pensively in a small garden; it is already stripped of its blossoms, but sheltered, like those we see behind our cliffs in France, or in the lowlands of Holland. The exotics have already been placed in the green-house. The fallen leaves have unveiled the statues near them, which afford increased pleasure now that the flowers are gone. These are luxuries of art, which somewhat contrast with the very simple yet modest and dignified toilet of the lady – a blond or grey silk, relieved only by a lilac ribbon.

'Though without ornament, she is none the less elegant: elegant for her husband, and simple to the profit of the poor.

'She reaches the end of the walk and turns round. We have now an opportunity to observe her. But have I not seen her already in the museums of Amsterdam or the Hague? She recalls to me one of Philip de Champagne's ladies – one who took possession of my heart at first sight, so frank yet so chaste, intelligent but simple-minded, having no subtilty with which to keep clear of the snares of the world. This woman has clung to me for thirty years, persistently returning, making me concerned for her, and forcing me to ask myself what was her name? What became of her? Was she happy here in this world? And how did she get through life? 'She reminds me of another portrait, a Van Dyck, a poor pale and sickly lady. The white-satinness of her incomparably delicate skin adorns a body which is wasting away. In her

beautiful eyes is a deep melancholy – that of age, of the heart's sorrows, or perhaps of the climate. Hers is the vague and far-reaching look of a person who has always had before her eyes the vast Northern Ocean, the great grayish sea, utterly deserted save by the sea-gull in his flight.' (book v, chapter 5).

'Je vois d'ici une dame, je la vois marcher pensive dans un jardin peu étendu, & défleuri de bonne heure, mais abrité, comme on en voit derrière nos falaises en France, ou les dunes de la Hollande. Les arbustes exotiques sont déjà rentrés dans la serre. Les feuilles tombées dévoilent quelques statues. Luxe d'art qui contraste un peu avec la très-simple toilette de la dame, modeste, grave, où la soie noire (ou grise) s'égaye à peine d'un simple ruban lilas. Parée de rien, on peut le dire, elle n'en est pas moins élégante. Élégante pour son mari & simple au profit des pauvres.

'Elle atteint le bout de l'allée, se retourne. Nous pouvons la voir. Mais ne l'ai je pas vue déjà aux musées d'Amsterdam ou de la Haye? Elle me rappelle une dame de Philippe de Champagne (NB. au Louvre) qui m'était entrée dans le coeur, si candide, si honnête, suffisamment intelligente, simple pourtant, sans finesse pour se démêler des ruses du monde. Cette femme m'est restée trente années, me revenant obstinément, m'inquiétant, me faisant dire "Mais comment se nommait-elle? Que lui est-il arrivé? a-t-elle eu un peu de bonheur? Et comment s'est-elle tirée de la vie?" Celle-ci me rappelle encore un autre portrait, un van Dyck, une pauvre dame, fort blanche, malade. Le pâle satin de sa peau d'incomparable finesse, orne un corps souffrant, qui mollit. Dans ses beaux yeux flotte une grande mélancolie, celle de l'âge, des chagrins de coeur, du climat aussi peut-être. C'est le regard vague, lointain, d'une personne qui a eu habituellement sous les yeux le vaste Océan du Nord, la grande mer grise, déserte, sauf le vol du goëland.'

136. Michelet, *The bird*, pp. 278, 279. 'Plus bas, bien plus bas, dans une étroite cage, un oiseau un peu plus gros, fort inhumainement resserré, donnait une impression bizarre et toute contraire. C'était un pinson, et le premier que j'aie vu aveugle. Nul spectacle plus pénible. [...] Son attitude tourmentée, laborieuse, me rendait son chant douloureux. Le pis, c'est qu'elle était humaine: elle rappelait les tours de tête et d'épaules disgracieux que se donnent souvent

les myopes ou les hommes devenus aveugles. Tel n'est jamais l'aveugle-né. [...] Ce malheureux virtuose, qui chantait quand même, contrefait et déformé, eût été une image basse des laideurs de l'esclave artiste, s'il n'eût été ennobli par cet indomptable effort de poursuivre la lumière, la cherchant toujours en haut, et puisant toujours son chant dans l'invisible soleil qu'il avait gardé dans l'esprit.'

137. Michelet, *The bird*, p. 77. 'Tel l'oiseau, et tel l'homme. C'est l'impression universelle.'

138. Michelet, *The bird*, p. 330. 'Rembrandt a puisé dans la science du clair-obscur les effets à la fois doux et chauds de ses peintures. Le rossignol commence à chanter quand la brume du soir se mêle aux derniers rayons du soleil; et c'est pour cela que nous vibrons à sa voix.

Notre âme, à ces heures indélicates du crépuscule, reprend possession de sa lumière intérieure.'

139. Jules Michelet, *Le peuple*, Paris 1845, p. 18. 'Le trait éminent, capital, qui m'a toujours frappé le plus, dans ma longue étude du peuple, c'est que, parmi les désordres de l'abandon, les vices de la misère, j'y trouvais une richesse de sentiment et une bonté de coeur, très-rare dans les classes riches.'

140. Isaiah 32: 3.

141. Genesis 2: 24

142. Michelet, *Le peuple*; trans. C. Cocks as *The people*, London 1846, p. 263. 'L'enfant saura le monde, mais d'abord qu'il se sache lui-même, en ce qu'il a de meilleur, je veux dire en la France. Le reste, il l'apprendra par elle. A elle, de l'initier, de lui dire sa tradition. Elle lui dira les trois révélations qu'elle a reçues, comment Rome lui apprit le juste, et la Grèce le beau, et la Judée le saint. Elle reliera son enseignement suprême à la première leçon que lui donna la mère; celle-ci lui apprit Dieu, et la grande mère lui apprendra le dogme de l'amour, Dieu en l'homme, le christianisme, – et comment l'amour, impossible aux temps haineux, barbares, du moyen-âge, fut écrit dans les lois par la révolution, en sorte que le dieu intérieur de l'homme pût se manifester.'

143. Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, *Des jésuites*, Paris 1843, Fifth lecture; trans. G.H. Smith as *Jesuits and jesuitism*, London 1846. 'Le moyen-âge a dit dans son dernier livre (*l'Imitation*): Que Dieu parle, et que les docteurs se taisent.'

144. Michelet, *Love*, p. 20. 'Le plus grand succès du temps est celui d'un livre de femme, le roman de madame Stowe, traduit dans toutes les

langues, et lu par toute la terre, devenu pour une race l'évangile de la liberté.'

145. Michelet uses this quotation, attributed to Proudhon, which was also one of Flaubert's favourite lines, in *L'amour* and in *La femme*.

146. Michelet, *Love*, p. 35. 'Deux personnes dépensent moins qu'une.'

147. See n. 135.

148. Pollock, p. 46.

149. Sund, p. 52.

150. Zola, *Mes haines*. 'dans le tableau (l'œuvre d'art), je cherche, j'aime l'homme – l'artiste.

'Nos artistes ne sont plus des hommes larges et puissants, sains d'esprit, vigoureux de corps, comme étaient les Véronèse et les Titien. Il y a eu un détraquement de toute la machine cérébrale. Les nerfs ont dominé, le sang s'est appauvri, les mains lasses et faibles n'ont plus cherché à créer que les hallucinations du cerveau.

'Aujourd'hui on peint des pensées, comme autrefois on peignait des corps. L'extase malade a fait naître des Ary Scheffer [...].

'Le seul génie de ce temps, Eugène Delacroix, était atteint d'une névrose aiguë, il a peint comme on écrit, en racontant toutes les fièvres cuisantes de sa nature. [...]

'Je sais que le mot "métier" effarouche ces messieurs; ils ne veulent pas être des ouvriers, et cependant ils ne devraient être que cela. [...] 'Ce dont je me plains, c'est que pas un d'eux n'a le coup de pinceau gras et magistral du véritable ouvrier, de l'homme travaillant en pleine pâte sans craindre les éclaboussures. [...]

'Ah! [...] si nos peintres vivaient en lutteurs, en hommes puissants et vigoureux, s'ils apprenaient leur métier, s'ils oubliaient l'idéal pour se souvenir de la nature, si le public consentait à être intelligent et à ne plus huer les personnalités nouvelles, nous verrions peut-être d'autres œuvres aux murs des salles d'exposition, des œuvres humaines et vivantes, profondes de vérité et d'intérêt.'

151. See letter 574. *Médanisme*, a term that refers to the Médan soirées Zola organized, is really preferable to *Naturalisme*, which encompasses other arts as well as literature, other eras besides Zola's, and which consequently does justice neither to Zola nor to the history of art. However, in order to make the text more readable, Zola's term has been retained, with the addition of a capital letter to distinguish it from naturalism in its broader sense – a term that can include

Van Gogh, as Evert van Uiterd demonstrated in 'Van Gogh's taste for reality, on earth as it is in heaven', in exhib. cat. *Vincent's choice*, pp. 73-86. 152. See letter 358.

153. Sund, pp. 78-80.

154. *Une page d'amour* is structured around five long descriptions of Paris, which punctuate the narrative. Like the different views of Rouen Cathedral by Monet, each appears to show the same reality in a different light.

155. See letter 267.

156. Letter to Picasso, 3 January 1947, in Antonin Artaud, 'Lettres inédites à Pablo Picasso', *Europe* 873-74 (January-February 2002), p. 43. 'Les livres, les écrits, les toiles, l'art ne sont rien; ce qui juge un homme c'est sa vie et non son œuvre, et qu'est-elle sinon le cri de sa vie.'

157. See n. 150.

158. See n. 145.

159. Letter from Stéphane Mallarmé to Emile Zola to mark the publication of *L'assommoir* (1877). 'Ceux qui vous accusent de n'avoir pas écrit pour le peuple se trompent, dans un sens, autant que ceux qui regrettent un idéal ancien; vous en avez trouvé un qui est moderne, c'est tout...'

160. See letter 250.

161. John Forster, *The life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols., London 1872-74.

162. Alain (Emile Auguste Chartrier), *En lisant Dickens*. Paris 1945. 'C'est le seul à mes yeux qui, au lieu de me proposer des idées qu'il a inventées, me propose les miennes et les marque de chaos et de création.'

163. Van Gogh's interest in Delacroix went well beyond this one canvas. Van Gogh knew Delacroix's work at first hand but had only seen reproductions of *Liberty leading the people*.

164. Théophile Silvestre, *Eugène Delacroix, documents nouveaux*, Paris 1864, p. 64. 'qui toucha quarante ans tout le clavier des passions humaines, et dont le pinceau grandiose, terrible ou suave passait des saints aux guerriers, des guerriers aux amants, des amants aux tigres, et des tigres aux fleurs.'

165. *Ibid.*, p. 63. 'soleil dans la tête et un orage dans le cœur'.

166. *Ibid.*, p. 65. 'Le sentiment du Beau est-il cette impression produite en nous par un tableau de Vélasquez, une estampe de Rembrandt, une scène de Shakespeare? Ou bien le Beau nous est-il révélé par la vue de nez droits, des draperies correctes de Girodet,

Gérard et autres élèves de David? Le Silène est beau, le Faune est beau. La tête de Socrate dans l'antique est pleine de caractère avec un nez épaté, une bouche lippue et de petits yeux.'

167. Ibid., p. 4. 'La nature extérieure, réfléchie ou plutôt transfigurée par l'imagination, rayonne ou s'assombrit dans [...] [les] paysages [de Delacroix]; la lumière et la couleur s'y associent ou s'y opposent au caractère des passions humaines.'

168. Vincent did not find the theory of complementary colours directly in Delacroix's work. He seems to have learned about it from Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des arts du dessin*. Chapter 13 of Book III (Painting) sets out the theory of complementary colours as Van Gogh used it. The example of Delacroix was used frequently to illustrate the theory.

169. Silvestre, p. 5. 'Elevons notre renommée sur les ruines de notre propre corps!'; 'La santé de Delacroix était frêle et capricieuse; le froid, le chaud, le sec, l'humide, agissaient sur son talent et sur son caractère d'une façon étonnante. Ce qui le chagrinait le plus, c'était la nécessité d'interrompre ses ouvrages en train. Il soignait sa santé comme un guerrier panse son cheval.'

170. Ibid., pp. 17-18. 'Avec sa subtilité, sa persévérance, et malgré l'étude continuelle de la nature et des maîtres, Delacroix était resté plus longtemps qu'on ne le pense sans principes certains, suppléant de son mieux le savoir par le sentiment. En plein âge mûr, il disait encore: 'Je vois chaque jour que je ne sais pas mon métier.' Pas d'affectation dans cet aveu: il sentait réellement que sa première éducation de peintre fut insuffisante, sinon mauvaise.'

171. Ibid., p. 48. 'Fort circonspect envers les personnes qu'il estimait le plus, il était pour ceux qui le comprenaient et l'aimaient d'une franchise et d'une vivacité singulières. Un peu de politique était d'ailleurs bien excusable chez un homme mis sur le qui-vive perpétuel par quarante années de lutte, soutenues à lui seul contre tout son siècle, et dont il est enfin sorti vainqueur. Ses convictions lui étaient aussi naturelles que le mouvement du sang et de la respiration; mais il n'aimait pas à les exprimer et ne consentait à les expliquer que dans un tête-à-tête.'

172. Ibid., p. 49. 'Au lieu de s'épuiser vainement à prouver en esthétique le pour et le contre, il fit son oeuvre selon son coeur. De nos jours, comme dans l'avenir, il ne peut être glorifié que par les natures audacieuses et vivaces, fatalement

liées à lui par une sorte de consanguinité intellectuelle.'

173. Van Gogh uses the familiar 'Pa' in referring to his father and the more formal 'Vader' for Millet.

174. Sensier, p. 121. 'Millet, paysan, sera toujours pauvre comme un paysan.'

175. Sensier (English ed.), p. 43 (last sentence omitted). 'Il lisait tout, depuis l'*Almanach boiteux* de Strasbourg jusqu'à Paul de Kock, depuis Homère jusqu'à Béranger; il lut aussi avec passion Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Cooper, le Faust de Goethe et les ballades allemandes. Victor Hugo et Chateaubriand l'avaient surtout impressionné vivement. [...] Les cabinets de lecture de Cherbourg passaient en entier sous ses yeux, et lorsqu'il arriva à Paris il était déjà un esprit orné et familier avec les lettres. [...] Il avait connu à Cherbourg un jeune commis de librairie qui lui procurait des livres [...]. C'est ainsi que se fit l'instruction de François Millet, sans autre maître que ses attractions, sans autre guide que sa logique naturelle.'

176. Sensier (English ed.), pp. xi-xii. Millet a cherché la beauté dans l'expression et l'expression dans le type fondamental du travailleur des champs. Aussi bien que personne, il savait où réside la splendeur apollinienne, où apparaissent la régularité, la finesse, la distinction des races civilisées. Il n'ignorait pas les systèmes de sélection, et il avait lu les grammaires sur la plastique. Il avait vu, tout comme un autre, les 'beaux gars' de son pays et les jolies filles de nos campagnes; mais il cherchait à caractériser avec toute la force de son esprit, avec tous les souvenirs de son cœur, la condition pénible et mystérieuse de la créature sur cette terre. [...] Le paysan n'est pour lui qu'un être vivant qui formule, avec une puissance plus réelle que tout autre homme, la figure presque symbolique de l'humanité. [...] En voyant la famille rustique occupée aux travaux des champs, l'âme inquiète, l'attitude résignée, le geste lent et douloureux, on reviendra vers Millet, et celui qui aura compris se dira: Il y a là un peintre qui donne la vie aux humbles, un poète qui exalte les grandeurs ignorées, un homme de bien qui encourage et console.'

177. See letter 822.

178. Sensier, p. x (English ed., p. 11). 'Millet n'est cependant ni un découragé, ni un triste. C'est un laboureur qui affectionne son champ, le

défriche, l'ensemence et le récolte. Son champ, c'est l'art. Son inspiration, c'est la vie, c'est la nature qu'il aime de toutes les forces de son être. Qu'on ne cherche donc dans sa pensée que celle d'un homme compatissant et pieux, qui admire, qui souffre et qui le dit par la voix de son cœur.' 179. Ibid., pp. 101-2 (English ed., p. 72). 'L'art n'est pas une partie de plaisir. C'est un combat, un engrenage qui broie... Je ne suis pas philosophe, je ne veux pas supprimer la douleur, ni trouver une formule qui me rende stoïque et indifférent. La douleur est, peut-être, ce qui fait le plus fortement exprimer les artistes.' 180. Ibid., p. 118 (English ed., p. 84). 's'était logé dans une petite maison de paysan où trois pièces basses et étroites lui servaient d'atelier, de cuisine et de chambre pour sa femme et ses trois enfants.' 181. Ibid.. 'C'est la vie d'un homme des champs dans ce qu'elle a de plus expressif. Il ne faut y chercher ni un plaidoyer ni une satire; mais seulement la pensée sereine d'un homme heureux de pouvoir exprimer les grandeurs, les misères de ses compagnons.' 182. Ibid. 'fait de la nature vraie avec ce qui n'est pas de la réalité pure'; 'Il utilise le réel, mais il le transforme'. 183. Ibid., p. 354 (English ed., p. 209). 'le type [...] est, à mon sens, la plus puissante vérité'. 184. Ibid. (English ed., p. 210). 'il avait, sur son chemin, rencontré la laideur. Je veux dire – et on le lui a certes assez reproché – que, systématiquement hostile aux idéalizations banales, il ne craignait point de donner place dans ses compositions rustiques à des figures d'un aspect rude, d'une individualité quelque peu grossière ou du moins mal dégrossie, d'une expression qui semble avouer que l'être humain n'est pas toujours prodigieusement au-dessus de l'animal. C'est la tendance [...] qui fut même signalée par Thoré à propos des *Paysans rapportant un veau*.' 185. Ibid. (English ed., p. 221). 'Il nous semble que Millet a apporté dans l'école un élément nouveau, une manière qui, en abrégant la forme, la généralise et l'agrandit. On serait malavisé à lui reprocher d'avoir supprimé le détail et éliminé l'accident: il cherchait l'essentiel, il l'a trouvé. Millet avait son idéal, et alors même qu'il n'aurait pas toujours réussi à l'atteindre, son honneur est d'avoir lutté avec une indomptable énergie pour rester fidèle à la vérité en échappant aux petites choses de la prose.'

6. The Hague: Realism and reality

- 186. See Pollock, p. 24.
- 187. See n. 135.
- 188. Sund, p. 45.
- 189. Charles Dickens, *The personal history and experience of David Copperfield the younger*, London 1927, p. 267.
- 190. Zola knew his subjects extremely well, both through experience and research. But he did not share the lives of alcoholics when he wrote *L'assommoir*, and he did not open a charcuterie stall at Les Halles when he wrote *Le ventre de Paris*.
- 191. Michelet, *The bird*, p. 283 (see n. 51); Pabst (ed.), *Van Gogh's Poetry Albums*, p. 30.
- 192. Powers Erickson, p. 71.
- 193. See letter 278.
- 194. See n. 64.
- 195. 'During his stay in The Hague, Vincent relived George Eliot and *Janet's Repentance*, he relived Dickens' London and his own experiences of Whitechapel. The boundaries between literature and life, between painting and novel, were removed: the spirit of Felix Holt enters the drawing of a soup-kitchen, that of Dickens invades a watercolour of a third-class waiting-room. Eliot and Dickens had sustained Vincent at different periods: Eliot in the mid-seventies in London and Paris, Dickens in the Borinage in the late seventies. But in The Hague they come together: never was their sustenance more important to him than then.' Ronald Pickvance, exhib. cat. *English influences on Vincent van Gogh*, Nottingham (University) 1974-75.
- 196. See n. 51.
- 197. See letter 388.
- 198. See also Hammacher, 'Van Gogh – Michelet – Zola'. 'Summing up we see that Vincent, during the years he worked as a painter, was most closely and deeply allied to the naturalism of Zola. He was not so much influenced by it, but it made him realize that as a painter he had achieved things which found their parallel, even their equivalent, in literature.'

7. Nuenen: The painter of peasants

- 199. See Van Gogh-Bonger
- 200. Just like the career of art dealing, Van Gogh's Christian name, 'Vincent', was chosen for family reasons. It was usual to choose

Christian names that had already been given to one's forebears. The first son bore his grandfather's name, the second his father's; this was a way of paying homage to parents and grandparents, a sign of gratitude, affection and respect. Van Gogh's parents' first child, had already been given this name. Today, it would seem that bearing the name of a stillborn child, whose grave was just a stone's throw from one's childhood home, would be sufficient to lead to psychological instability. But the Van Gogh family did not think like that. In their eyes, there was absolutely nothing traumatic about bearing the name of a deceased older brother. Family tradition required that the passing on of ancestors' Christian names to children should take precedence over mourning. It went without saying that the firstborn, or rather the first surviving child, would be called 'Vincent'. This choice was not influenced by any original drama or unresolved traumas experienced by Van Gogh's parents, condemning their eldest son to mental imbalance. See also Verkade-Bruining, p. 17; and Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker, 'Self-Portrait between the lines: a newly discovered letter from Vincent van Gogh to H.G. Tersteeg', *Van Gogh Museum Journal* 2003, pp. 98-III.

201. See, for example, Verkade-Bruining and Powers Erickson.

202. For more details regarding Van Gogh senior's affection and the difficulties he experienced, well before his eldest son came to live under his roof as a painter, see Hulsker, 'What Theo really thought of Vincent', and more especially the letters printed in that article.

203. 'As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.'

204. 'Le chien perdu', in *Poésies de François Coppée*, Paris 1880, pp. 85-86.

Il semble dire: Allons – emmène-moi – veux-tu?

On est ému – pourtant on manque de courage;

On est pauvre soi-même – on a peur de la rage

Enfin – mauvais – on fait la mine de lever

Sa canne – on dit au chien: Veux-tu te sauver!

Et – tout penaud – il va faire son offre à d'autres.

205. See letter 155.

206. See letter 452.

207. In 1896, Lemerre published an autobiographical work by Breton entitled *Un peintre paysan*.

208. 'Le retour des champs (à François Millet)',

in Breton, *Les champs et la mer*, pp. 51-53.

Par le crépuscule & le hâle

le paysan DEUX FOIS BRUNI.

209. See letter 502.

210. *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 21 (October-December 1866), p. 298. 'Je vous dédie mon *sphinx*, que vous reconnaîtrez pour un ancêtre des amoureux de la Nature, qui la comprennent et qui l'expriment dans son attrayante sincérité.'

211. *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 4 (October-December 1859), p. 41. 'le sentiment mystérieux et intime de la nature'.

212. Henry Havard, 'Johannes Vermeer (Ver Meer de Delft)', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1883), pp. 389-99. 'L'art a pour objet la beauté et non l'idée. Mais, par la beauté, il doit faire aimer ce qui est vrai, ce qui est juste, ce qui est fécond pour le développement de l'homme. [...] Un portrait, un paysage, une scène familière peuvent avoir ce résultat aussi bien qu'une image héroïque ou allégorique. Tout ce qui exprime, dans une forme bien sentie, un caractère profond de l'homme ou de la nature renferme de l'idéal, puisqu'il provoque la réflexion sur des points essentiels de la vie.' This text was not quoted or mentioned by Van Gogh, but testifies to the problems occupying the minds of art critics and historians in the 1860s.

213. *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 21 (July 1866),

p. 124. 'Oui, la touche est l'écriture du peintre, c'est la frappe de son esprit.'

8. Paris

214. This study does not describe in detail the relationship between the Parisian realist literature consulted by Van Gogh and the time he spent in the French capital. Sund's work does so very pertinently, in so far as the scarce data on this period allows reliable conclusions to be drawn.

215. Sund, pp. 109-13.

216. Hulsker, *Vincent and Theo van Gogh*, pp. 318-19.

217. Louis van Tilborgh and Marije Vellekoop, *Schilderijen, Nederlandse Periode, 1881-1885*, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 218-225.

218. Joan Greer, "'Een man van smerten ende versocht in krankheit", Het christologische beeld van de kunstenaar in Van Goghs *Stilleven met open bijbel*', *Jong Holland* 3 (1997), pp. 30-42.

219. Powers Erickson, pp. 92-93: '*Still-life with Open Bible* may represent van Gogh's attempt to reconcile the Bible with contemporary literature, in order to make it more applicable to life in a modern society. He explained his concern to Théo, "I too read the Bible occasionally, just as I read Michelet or Balzac or Eliot; but I see quite different things in the Bible than father does, and I cannot find at all what father draws from it in his academic way." In explaining his "passion for books" to Théo, he mentioned the Bible first in the list of literary works he was currently reading.' This passage is incorrect: the quotations used are taken from letters written in 1881, when Van Gogh had just taken the decision to become an artist. *Still life with Bible* dates from 1885. There is no evidence to indicate that Van Gogh was reading the Bible at that time. In fact, bearing in mind the interests and ideas he had developed, this seems highly unlikely.

220. Evert van Uiter, Sjraar van Heugten and Louis van Tilborgh, *Vincent van Gogh: Paintings*, Milan & Rome 1990, p. 54.

221. Sund, p. 115.

222. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

223. *Verzamelde Brieven van Vincent van Gogh*, ed. J. van Gogh-Bonger, 4 vols., Amsterdam & Antwerp 1973, vol. 3, p. 97.

224. Emile Zola, *L'œuvre* (Paris 1886), trans. as *His masterpiece*, ed. Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, London 1902, pp. 33, 34. '... à Paris, Berthou, le célèbre peintre de *Néron au Cirque*, dont il avait fréquenté l'atelier pendant cinq mois, ne lui avait-il pas répété, à vingt reprises, qu'il ne ferait jamais rien! Ah! qu'il les regrettait aujourd'hui, ces six mois d'imbéciles tâtonnements, d'exercices niais sous la férule d'un bonhomme dont la caboche différait de la sienne! [...] Est-ce que, en art, il y avait autre chose que de donner ce qu'on avait dans le ventre? est-ce que tout ne se réduisait pas à planter une bonne femme devant soi, puis à la rendre comme on la sentait? est-ce qu'une botte de carottes, oui, une botte de carottes! étudiée directement, peinte naïvement, dans la note personnelle où on la voit, ne valait pas les éternelles tartines de l'Ecole, cette peinture au jus de chique, honteusement cuisinée d'après les recettes? Le jour venait où une seule carotte originale serait grosse d'une révolution.

225. See letter 553.

226. Zola, *His masterpiece*, p. 34. 'Dans ses rares

heures de contentement, il avait la fierté de ces quelques études, les seules dont il fût satisfait, celles qui annonçaient un grand peintre, doué admirablement, entravé par des impuissances soudaines et inexplicables.'

227. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35. 'Il poursuivait avec violence, sabrant à grands coups le veston de velours, se fouettant dans son intransigeance qui ne respectait personne. Tous ces barbouilleurs d'images à deux sous, des réputations volées, des imbéciles ou des malins à genoux devant la bêtise publique! Pas un gaillard qui flanque une gifle aux bourgeois!... Tiens! le père Ingres, tu sais s'il me tourne sur le cœur, celui-là, avec sa peinture glaireuse? Eh bien! c'est tout de même un sacré bonhomme, je le trouve très crâne, et je lui tire mon chapeau, car il se fichait de tout, il avait un dessin du tonnerre de Dieu, qu'il a fait avaler de force aux idiots qui croient aujourd'hui le comprendre... après ça, entends-tu! ils ne sont que deux, Delacroix et Courbet. Le reste, c'est de la fripouille...'

228. Gustave Coquiott, *Vincent van Gogh*, Paris 1923, p. 130.

229. *Ibid.*, p. 122. '*La Nouvelle Athènes*, Place Pigalle. Le café des indépendants. Où l'on vit Manet, Degas, Renoir, et les critiques Duranty, Castagnary; se pressaient à l'heure de l'apéritif des larges chapeaux, des cravates Lavallière et des pesantes cannes. On y huait l'Institut; on y vomissait l'art officiel, qui tenait ses assises, lui, au *Café de la Rochefoucauld*, dans la rue du même nom; morne café qui recueillait Cormon, Gervex et M. Gérôme.'

230. *Ibid.*, p. 122. 'sous-sol recérait un pittoresque ordurier qui enchantait les Parisiens'; 'un piaffant marché de tribades et de jeunes pédéastes'; 'Des Cabarets artistiques paraient partout, à Montmartre.'

231. Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, exhib. cat. *Van Gogh à Paris*, Paris (Musée d'Orsay) 1988; John Rewald, *Post-impressionism: from Van Gogh to Gauguin*, New York 1978.

232. The many biographies of Van Gogh have commented widely on the reasons that led him to move to the south of France. It is pointless to repeat them here. However, in my view, we should take account of the fact that Van Gogh was reading works by Zola, Daudet and Voltaire, which he associated with the south; Daudet in particular may have prompted him to choose Arles and its surrounding area.

233. In his article of 18 September 1886,

Jean Moréas (the pseudonym of Ioannis Papadiamantopoulos), a Greek poet writing in French, set out the aesthetic of the symbolist movement: the search for the primordial idea, through images which are suggestive rather than descriptive.

234. Sund, p. 132.

235. Ibid.

236. Alphonse Daudet, *Souvenirs d'un homme de lettres* (Paris, 1888), trans. Laura Ensor as *Recollections of a literary man*, London 1896, pp. 51-52. 'Dans un minuscule cahier vert que j'ai là devant moi, [...] j'ai résumé mon pays de naissance, climat, mœurs, tempérament, l'accent, les gestes, frénésies et ébullitions de notre soleil, et cet ingénu besoin de mentir qui vient d'un excès d'imagination, d'un délire expansif, bavard et bienveillant, si peu semblable au froid mensonge pervers et calculé qu'on rencontre dans le Nord. [...] Tout noté [...], jusqu'aux geignements de nos maladies que notre imagination grossit et répercute, presque toutes nerveuses, rhumatismales, causées par ce ciel de vent et de flamme qui vous dévore jusqu'à la moëlle, met tout l'être en fusion comme une canne à sucre; noté jusqu'aux crimes du Midi, explosions de passion, de violence ivre, ivre sans boire, qui déroutent, épouvantent la conscience des juges, venus d'un autre climat, éperdus au milieu de ces exagérations, de ces témoignages extravagants qu'ils ne savent pas "mettre au point".'

237. Despite the points made here, it is not possible to state that Van Gogh definitely read the work. He makes no mention of it in his correspondence, which may be explained by the fact that he was taking care to safeguard his image as a cultured artist. He may have been hesitant to mention *Lettres de mon moulin*, which were not highly regarded by the cultural intelligentsia of the time.

238. Alphonse Daudet, *Les lettres de mon moulin*, Paris 1887, p. 145; trans. Frank Hunter Potter as *Letters from my mill*, London 1893, p. 147-8. 'trop de mistral et trop de soleil, une vraie journée de Provence. [...] je rêvais de rester là tout le jour, comme un lézard, à boire la lumière, en écoutant chanter les pins... [...] Dans les ormes du cours, blancs de poussière, les cigales chantaient comme en pleine Crau.'

239. Ibid., p. 13. 'Tout ce beau paysage provençal ne vit que par la lumière. Et maintenant, comment voulez-vous que je le regrette, votre

Paris bruyant et noir? [...] C'est si bien le coin que je cherchais, un petit coin parfumé et chaud, à mille lieues des journaux, des fiacres, du brouillard!... Et que de jolies choses autour de moi! Il y a à peine huit jours que je suis installé, j'ai déjà la tête bourrée d'impressions et de souvenirs...'

240. Colette Becker, Introduction to *Les lettres de mon moulin*, Paris 1972. 'ne vit pas seulement dans la Provence de beaux paysages, des habitants pittoresques et amusants – surtout pour des Parisiens! – par leur accent ou leur "faculté de mirage". Le pays qu'il aime n'est pas celui attrayant et facile des villes et des plages de la côte, mais la terre rude aux hommes, étourdie de chaleur et du bruissement des cigales, brûlée par le soleil, desséchée par le vent, les rochers arides ou les garrigues crayeuses de Fontvieille et de ses environs, Nîmes, Beaucaire, Arles, le désert de la Crau [...]. Des deux "Midi" qu'il discerne, "le Midi bourgeois" "comique" et "le Midi paysan" "splendide", c'est le Midi paysan qu'il peint dans ses *Lettres*.'

241. Daudet, *Letters from my mill*, p. 187. 'Pour bien connaître les oranges, il faut les avoir vues chez elles, aux îles Baléares, en Sardaigne, en Corse, en Algérie, dans l'air bleu doré, l'atmosphère tiède de la Méditerranée. Je me rappelle un petit bois d'orangers, aux portes de Blidah; c'est là qu'elles étaient belles! Dans le feuillage sombre, lustré, vernissé, les fruits avaient l'éclat de verres de couleur, et devaient l'air environnant avec cette auréole de splendeur qui entoure les fleurs éclatantes. Ça et là des éclaircies laissaient voir à travers les branches des remparts de la petite ville, le minaret d'une mosquée, le dôme d'un marabout, et au-dessus l'énorme masse de l'Atlas, verte à sa base, couronnée de neige comme d'une fourrure blanche, avec des moutonnements, un flou de flocons tombés.'

242. Ibid., pp. 187-89. 'poussière de nacre'; 'reflets de plume de paon blanc'; 'or voilé de claires étoffes blanches'; 'soutanes rouges sous robes de dentelles'; 'immense mer bleue'; 'beaux fruits d'or rouge'.

243. Ibid., pp. 127-28. 'Pourquoi serais-je triste, après tout? Je vis à mille lieues des brouillards parisiens, sur une colline lumineuse, dans le pays des tambourins et du vin muscat. Autour de moi tout n'est que soleil et musique; j'ai des orchestres de culs-blancs, des orphéons de mésanges; le matin, les courlis qui font:

'Coureli! coureli!' à midi, les cigales, puis les pâtres qui jouent du fifre, et les belles filles brunes qu'on entend rire dans les vignes... En vérité, l'endroit est mal choisi pour broyer du noir; je devrais plutôt expédier aux dames des poèmes couleur de rose et des pleins paniers de contes galants.'

244. Coquiot, p. 126. 'Vincent vint vivre de nombreux soirs'.

245. Jan Hulsker, *The new complete Van Gogh*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 1996.

246. Sund, pp. 148-52.

247. See letter 574.

248. See letter 739.

249. See letter 753.

250. Guy de Maupassant, *Bel-Ami*, trans. Eric Sutton, London 1955, pp. 3-4. 'Et [Duroy] se rappela ses deux années d'Afrique, la façon dont il rançonnait les Arabes dans les petits postes du Sud. Et un sourire cruel et gai passa sur ses lèvres au souvenir d'une escapade qui avait coûté la vie à trois hommes de la tribu des Ouled-Alane et qui leur avait valu, à ses camarades et à lui, vingt poules, deux moutons et de l'or, et de quoi rire pendant six mois.'

251. See Henry Emile Chevalier, 'Rabelais et ses éditeurs', *Revue Moderne*, 25 November 1868.

252. See letter 657.

253. See letter 621. The book was probably Wagner's, *Musiciens, poètes et philosophes* (1887), translated and with an introduction by Camille Benoît.

254. Here, the term 'superficial' should be treated with caution. I mean a perfectly justified lack of interest on the part of the painter rather than his taking an easy approach. To my mind, in what may be seen as an entirely Dutch tradition of sobriety, Van Gogh might be described by the words of the writer Gerard Reve, who declared in an interview: 'I do not like improbable things, like people who jump from the third floor then walk away, or who touch the clouds, or who suddenly live three hundred years later, or who are invisible to some people but not to others, etc. In particular, I have a horror of allegory. This is a genre which is very popular at the moment, but to my mind, it is the product of poverty. Only someone who cannot see the greatness and the embrace of day-to-day reality will warm himself with allegorical, symbolic or satirical nonsense. One can transmit the horror of existence to the reader, make him sensitive to the fathomless depths of time and space, to the

full weight of melancholy, yes, even to mystery, by the simple, intentional use of facts taken from reality – it is inexhaustible – and by the equally simple and intentional use of language.'

Gerard Reve, *Verzameld Werk*, part 1, Amsterdam & Antwerp 1998, pp. 642-43.

255. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, London 1969, p. 42. 'Einst war der Frevel an Gott der grösste Frevel, aber Gott starb, und damit auch diese Frevelhaften. An der Erde zu freveln ist jetzt das Furchtbarste und die Eingeweide des Unerforschlichen höher zu achten, als der Sinn der Erde!'

256. This may have been the case, but it seems pointless to speculate on the subject.

257. See, e.g., letter 155.

258. Letter 544.

259. See Van der Veen, 'En tant que quant à moi', for the subject of the French language and Van Gogh.

9. Last letters

260. See Leo Jansen, Jan Robert (eds.) and H. van Crimpen, *Brief happiness: the correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bongers* (Cahier Vincent 7), Amsterdam & Zwolle, 1999.

261. Ibid., p. 160 (letter 46 from Theo to Jo, Paris, 14 February 1889). 'Het is hem niet mogelijk om op eene onverschillige manier met iemand om te gaan. Het is of het een of het ander. Zelfs voor hen, waar hij de beste vrienden mee is, is zijn omgang niet makkelijk, daar hij niets of niemand spaart. Het jaar dat wij samen hebben geleefd, was zeer moeielijk, al zijn wij vooral op het laatst het dikwijls eens geweest.'

262. Guy de Maupassant, *Pierre et Jean* (1889), trans. as *Pierre and Jean*, London 1902, p. lxiv. 'Il n'est point besoin du vocabulaire bizarre, compliqué, nombreux et chinois qu'on nous impose aujourd'hui sous le nom d'écriture artiste, pour fixer toutes les nuances de la pensée.'

263. Coquiot, p. 134. 'son ami, celui qui a le mieux connu le peintre de Tahiti'; 'l'incorrection savoureuse de sa parole où l'argot maritime et l'argot d'atelier habillaient étrangement des idées d'une pureté, d'une noblesse absolue'.

264. After his arrival in Paris in 1886, Van Gogh had rapidly identified the most important Impressionists, such as Monet, and the

Impressionists who had difficulty in living by their art, such as Gauguin. For Van Gogh, the term 'Impressionist' was a generic one, which does not refer to a particular technique. See Cornelia Homburg, exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh and the painters of the petit boulevard*, Saint Louis (Art Museum) & Frankfurt (Städtisches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie) 2001.

265. Paul Gauguin, *Avant et après*, Tahiti 1989, p. 19. 'Daudet, de Goncourt, la Bible brûlaient ce cerveau de Hollandais'.

266. Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, trans. Laura Ensor, Paris 1889, p. 210. 'l'amour des petits enfants, [...] c'est la seule chose que j'aime dans ce pays: les bébés et la manière dont on sait les comprendre.' (chapter 36).

267. Ibid., p. 214. 'Nous sommes au Japon et, vu l'influence de ce milieu qui atténue, rapetisse, drolatise, il n'en restera rien du tout.' (chapter 37).

268. Druick and Zegers, p. 151.

269. Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 226. 'sans le moindre ornement [...], pas de sièges, pas de coussins, pas de meubles'. (chapter 40).

270. Dorn, *Décoration*.

271. Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 228. 'Nos amis bonzes, malgré une certaine onction ecclésiastique, rient volontiers, d'un rire très bon enfant; dodus, joufflus, tondus, ils ne s'effarouchent de rien et aiment assez nos liqueurs françaises.' (chapter 40).

272. Ibid., p. 229. 'images profanes de leurs journaux illustrés'; 'laissent traîner leurs doigts sur les images quand elles représentent des dames.' (chapter 40).

273. See Jansen, 'Vincent van Gogh's belief in art as consolation'.

274. Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 229. 'Eh bien! le sanctuaire a beau être sombre, immense, les idoles, superbes... dans ce Japon, les choses n'arrivent jamais qu'à un semblant de grandeur. Une mesquinerie irrémédiable, une envie de rire est au fond de tout.' (chapter 40).

275. Ibid., p. 242. 'Petit, mièvre, mignard, - le Japon physique et moral tient tout entier dans ces trois mots-là.' (chapter 44).

276. Druick and Zegers, p. 126: 'A *mousmé*,' as Vincent explained to Théo, is "a Japanese girl... twelve to thirteen years old." But there is more to this subject: a *mousmé* is not just any young girl, but a child-woman brokered for short-term "marriages" such as Loti described with the girl known as Madame Chrysanthème. [...] by

echoing Loti in referring to "my *mousmé*," he indulged in a fantasy of sexual imperialism consistent with his ambition to be an "exploiter" of the South-as-Japan.' This point of view sets out from the principle that Van Gogh read books as they were written. Clearly this was not the case.

277. Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 234. 'Autour de sa petite tête étrange, son ombrelle ronde à mille plissures, éclairée par transparence, faisait une grande auréole bleue et rouge bordée de noir; et un laurier rose chargé de fleurs, poussé entre les pierres de ce pont, s'étalait à côté d'elle, baigné lui aussi de soleil. Derrière cette jeune fille et ce laurier fleuri, tout était repoussoir obscur.' (chapter 42).

278. Ibid., p. 235. 'délicieuse petite personne, d'une japonerie si idéale'. (chapter 42).

279. Jansen, 'Vincent van Gogh's belief in art as consolation', p. 13.

280. *L'abbé Constantin* was in fact written by Ludovic Halévy. One has to wonder how attentively Van Gogh – who always sought 'the man behind the book' – read this work.

281. Alphonse Daudet, *Tartarin of Tarascon*, trans. as *Tartarin of Tarascon*, London 1910 (1961), p. 9. 'En vain, pour agrandir ses horizons, pour oublier un peu le cercle et la place du Marché, en vain s'entourait-il de baobabs et autres végétations africaines; en vain entassait-il armes sur armes, kriss malais sur kriss malais; en vain se bourrait-il de lectures romanesques, cherchant, comme l'immortel don Quichotte, à s'arracher par la vigueur de son rêve aux griffes de l'impitoyable réalité... Hélas! tout ce qu'il faisait pour apaiser sa soif d'aventures ne servait qu'à l'augmenter. La vue de toutes ses aunes l'entretenait dans un état perpétuel de colère et d'excitation. Ses rifles, ses flèches, ses lasso lui criaient: 'Bataille! bataille!' Dans les branches de son baobab, le vent des grands voyages soufflait et lui donnait de mauvais conseils. Pour l'achever, Gustave Aimard et Fenimore Cooper...' (chapter 4).

282. Ibid., p. 22. 'Tartarin donnait toutes les explications qu'il voulait. Il avait lu Jules Gérard et connaissait la chasse au lion sur le bout du doigt, comme s'il l'avait faite. Aussi parlait-il de ces choses avec une grande éloquence.' (chapter 10).

283. Jules Verne, *Les enfants du Capitaine Grant*, trans. as *The mysterious document*, London c.1876. 'Cet homme grand, sec et maigre,

pouvait avoir quarante ans; il ressemblait à un long clou à grosse tête; sa tête, en effet, était large et forte, son front haut, son nez allongé, sa bouche grande, son menton fortement busqué. Quant à ses yeux, ils se dissimulaient derrière d'énormes lunettes rondes et son regard semblait avoir cette indécision particulière aux nyctalopes.' (chapter 6).

284. This argument is developed in Wouter van der Veen, 'From Michelet to Gauguin: Van Gogh's literary mind', *Van Gogh Museum Journal* 2003, pp. 88-97.

285. See Druick and Zegers.

286. Pabst (ed.), *Van Gogh's Poetry Albums*.

287. Gauguin, *Avant et après*, pp. 17-26.

288. See letter 805.

289. See letter 638.

290. Emile Bernard, 'Vincent Van Gogh', *La Plume*, 3 (September 1891). 'Il court chez Cormon duquel il se dégoûte assez vite, essaye les procédés complémentaires du pointillé sur lesquels il s'agace, et commence enfin son libre vol après l'inspection des Monticelli, Manet, Gauguin, etc. Certes, il ne tient d'aucun d'eux. Van Gogh est personnel plus qu'aucun. Amoureux des Japonais, des Indiens, des Chinois, de tout ce qui chante, rit, vibre, il trouva chez ces artistes innés les surprenantes techniques de ses harmonies, les extraordinaires envolées de son dessin, comme au fond de lui-même les délirants cauchemars dont il nous opprime sans relâche...'

Conclusion

291. See n. 83.

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Concordance

The following list gives the letter numbers used in this book (based on *Vincent van Gogh – The Letters*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols., 2009), followed by their numbers in, respectively, *De brieven van Vincent van Gogh*, ed. Han van Crimpén and Monique Berends-Albert, 4 vols., The Hague 1990; and *The complete letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3 vols., London 1958.

10: 10/9a	148: 147/126	368: 371/306	621: 624/494
14: 14/11a	152: 151/130	383: 386/321	625: 628/498
19: 19/14	153: 152/131	388: 391/326	626: 633/W4
26: 26/19	155: 154/133	396: 404/339	628: 630/B7
27: 27/20	158: 157/136	400: 401/336	630: 634/502
28: 28/21	170: 169/148	403: 405/339a	635: 638/507
32: 32/25	181: 179/155	405: 403/338	638: 642/506
33: 33/26	182: 180/156	408: 410/343	639: 643/509
35: 35/28	183: 181/157	409: 411/344	642: 646/511
38: 38/31	186: 184/159	413: 415/346	645: 650/513
44: 44/36	187: 185/160	414: 416/347b	650: 652/514
45: 45/36a	189: 187/161	415: 417/348	653: 657/W5
46: 45/36a	190: 188/R6	433: 435/R41	657: 661/519
49: 48/38	193: 191/164	450: 453/371	662: 667/525
54: 53/41	199: 198/169	452: 455/373	663: 663/520
55: 54/42	210: 209/180	456: 458/375	669: 673/528
56: 55/43	211: 210/181	458: 462/377	672: 676/530
62: 61/49	224: 223/192	459: 460/R48	676: 679/533
72: 71/57	225: 224/194	474: 476/386a	678: 681/W7
90: 90/82a-1	238: 238/207	500: 503/406	686: 690/542
93: 92/76	244: 244/212	502: 505/408	694: 698/544
102: 102/85	249: 250/218	509: 512/413	695: 699/553a-544a
103: 103/86	250: 251/219	526: 533/R58	710: 715/551
104: 104/87	252: 253/221	537: 540/429	714: 719/558b
108: 108/88	267: 267/R13	544: 547/436	719: 724/562
109: 109/89	278: 279/240	545: 548/437	720: 725/W9
112: 112/93	288: 290/248	553: 556/445	726: 730/564
117: 117/98	292: 282/242	556: 565/454	739: 743/-
120: 120/101	294: 295/253	557: 559/448	743: 747/574
121: 121/101a	312: 314/266	560: 562/451	753: 757/582
125: 124/104	316: 318/267	574: 576/W1	783: 785/596
126: 125/105	325: 327/R30	588: 589/470	785: 788/W13
127: 126/106	336: 338/279	589: 591/471	787: 790/599
128: 127/107	338: 340/281	599: 601/B4	805: 806/607
131: 130/110	345: 347/R35	602: 604/480	811: 813/612
132: 131/111	356: 358/295	603: 605/481	822: 824/B21
133: 132/112	358: 360/297	609: 611/487	RM5: -/-
134: 133/113	359: 361/R38	613: 615/490	
143: 142/121	361: 363/299	620: 623/500	

Index

References to illustrations are in *italics*

- Aeschylus 94
 Aimard, Gustave 208-9
 Alain (Emile Augustre Chartrier) 115
 Allebé, August 61
Almanach boiteux (Strasbourg) 123
 Amsterdam 26, 27, 34, 61, 65
 Andersen, Hans Christian 25, 27, 32, 61, 70
 Anker, Albert 62
 Antwerp 167-72, 174, 177, 192
 Aristotle 191
 Arles 29, 64, 70, 119, 127, 133, 143, 177, 178, 181,
 182-84, 186, 188, 191, 195, 196, 201, 203,
 206-7, 210, 213-16, 225, 227
 Yellow House 16, 199-201, 204, 214, 215, 216
 Artaud, Antonin 112
 Aurier, Albert 18, 229 (n. 8)
 Autran, Joseph: 'L'héritier présomptif' 27-28, 231
 (n. 44)
 Auvers-sur-Oise 43, 45, 227

 Bacon, Francis 84, 165
 Balzac, Honoré de 27, 110, 113, 129, 139, 143,
 159, 177, 210, 212
 Le père Goriot 110, 175
 Barr, Alfred H. 14, 15, 17
 Baudelaire, Charles 126
 Becker, Colette 183
 Beecher Stowe, Harriet 73, 94, 95, 129, 139
 Uncle Tom's cabin 42, 49, 72, 74, 95, 107, 132,
 218, 227
 Beers, Jan van 30; quoted 42
 Begemann, Margot 157, 158
 Béranger, Pierre-Jean de 123
 Bernard, Emile 11, 12, 31, 125, 126, 127, 184, 188,
 213, 214, 215, 224; quoted 12, 226
 letters to 12, 39, 64, 124, 125-26, 221
 Bible 13, 18, 19, 25, 27, 32, 48, 49, 50, 51, 57, 58,
 59, 61, 65, 67, 75, 89, 94, 105, 113, 123, 132,
 167-69, 168, 175, 198, 224
 see also Gospels; Paul, St

 Blanc, Charles 39
 Grammaire des arts du dessin 165, 238
 (n. 168)
 Bock, Théophile de 105
 Bonington, Richard Parkes 61, 116
 Borinage 56, 59, 60, 70, 72, 80, 87, 192
 Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne 27, 60, 123, 209
 Boughton, George Henry: *Godspeed! Pilgrims*
 setting out for Canterbury 49, 234 (n. 86)
 Breitner, George Hendrik 83
 Breton, Jules 21-24, 30, 50, 110, 155, 161;
 quoted 23, 161
 Brontë sisters 177
 Bunyan, John 27, 115, 116
 The pilgrim's progress 32, 33, 35, 116
 Bürger, William *see* Thoré
 Byron, George Gordon, Lord 116, 123

 Carlyle, Thomas 16, 27, 30, 62, 73, 85-87, 86, 90,
 129, 134, 145; quoted 73
 Castagnary, Jules-Antoine 176
 Champagne, Philippe de 51, 99
 Champfleury (Jules Husson-Fleury) 164
 Chateaubriand, François-René de 123, 138
 Conscience, Henri: *Le conscrit* 32
 Constable, John 116
 Cooper, James Fenimore 123, 208
 Coppée, François 30, 155, 156
 Coquiott, Gustave 175-77, 185, 197
 Cormon, Fernand 176, 190, 226
 Corot, Camille 110, 111, 121, 146
 Courbet, Gustave 173
 Cromwell, Oliver 61

 Dagen, Philippe 17
 Daubigny, Charles-François 50, 110, 146
 Daudet, Alphonse 35, 83, 84, 139, 145, 147, 156,
 180-85, 182, 187, 191, 196, 198
 L'évangéliste 166, 180, 181
 Fromont jeune et Risler aîné 180, 181
 L'immortel 208, 209
 Les lettres de mon moulin 180, 182-85, 198;
 quoted 182, 184, 185
 Le Nabab 181

- Daudet (continued)
Nuna Roumestan 166, 181
Les rois en exil 166, 181
Sapho 159, 166, 181
Souvenirs d'un homme de lettres, quoted 181
Tartarin de Tarascon 42, 57, 132, 180, 187, 196, 201, 208-9, 210, 212, 218, 227; quoted 208
- Daumier, Honoré 124, 126, 179
- David, Jacques-Louis 118
- Degas, Edgar 176
- Delacroix, Eugène 31, 50, 87, 103, 105, 110, 113, 116-21, 123, 171, 172, 173, 210
- Delaroche, Paul 62
- Dickens, Charles 49, 57, 58, 61, 70, 72, 73, 74, 82, 85, 94, 115-16, 129, 131-33, 137, 139, 169
A Christmas carol 49, 227
David Copperfield 132-33; quoted 132
Hard times 72
The mystery of Edwin Drood 131, 132
A tale of two cities 62, 164, 175
- Diderot, Denis 16, 191
- Doré, Gustave 84
- Dorn, Roland 16, 199
- Drenthe 136, 143, 146, 150, 153, 155
- Druick, Douglas 18, 45, 199, 204
- Dupré, Jules 110, 146, 202
- Duranty, Charles 176
- Dürer, Albrecht: *Melancholy* 82
- Duret, Théodore, quoted 12
- Eliot, George (Mary Ann Cross) 62, 73, 89, 99, 115, 139, 159, 177
Adam Bede 61
Felix Holt, the radical 15, 96
- Erckmann-Chatrian (Emile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian) 85, 129, 139, 145, 147, 166, 174, 177
L'ami Fritz 56, 141, 166
- Erickson, Kathleen Powers 17, 79, 87, 126, 136, 168
- Etten 64, 140, 146, 215, 216
- Fénelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe 56, 123
Les aventures de Télémaque 33-34, 35, 43; quoted 33-34, 43
- Flaubert, Gustave 57, 84, 99, 104, 105, 110, 139, 145, 156, 177, 194, 207, 210, 212
Bouvard et Pécuchet 201
Madame Bovary 104, 157
- Forster, John: *The life of Charles Dickens* 115
- Fromentin, Eugène 38-40, 50, 127, 128; quoted 40
- Gainsborough, Thomas 116
- Gauguin, Paul 11, 15, 16, 57, 188, 197-98, 199, 201, 212, 213-21, 226
Avant et après, quoted 198
 letters to 57, 188, 201, 217, 218, 220
- Gautier, Théophile 163-64
Gazette des Beaux-Arts 164, 165
- Gérard, François Pascal Simon (Baron) 118
- Gérard, Jules 209
- Gérôme, Jean-Léon 177
- Gervex, Henri 176
- Ginoux, Madame 184, 204
- Girodet-Trioson, Anne-Louis, 118
- Gladwell, Harry 50, 175
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 15, 27, 30, 32, 86
Faust 25, 116, 123
- Gogh, Anna van (sister) 56
- Gogh-Carbentus, Anna van (mother), 79, 97, 109, 120, 122, 129, 130, 136, 137, 151-56
- Gogh, Cornelis Marinus van (uncle) 77
- Gogh, Pastor Theodorus van (father) 13, 15, 25, 26, 27, 32, 34, 38, 48, 50, 51, 62, 64, 69, 72, 87, 97-98, 101, 109-10, 111, 112, 120, 121, 122, 129, 130, 136-37, 151-56, 158, 159, 161, 167, 169
- Gogh, Theo van (brother) 16, 21, 26, 27, 30, 38, 46, 47, 50, 51, 52-53, 69, 70, 72, 92, 94, 98, 99, 100, 103-4, 105, 111, 113, 122, 123, 129, 134, 137, 143, 144, 145, 150, 152, 153, 154, 155, 159, 160, 171, 173, 174, 177, 193, 197, 212, 218, 220, 221
 albums for 21, 22, 24, 27-30, 31, 136
 letters to 12, 21, 30, 35, 36, 38, 45-46, 50, 51, 52, 57, 58, 70-71, 81, 86-87, 88, 91-92, 93-94, 99-100, 104-5, 109-10, 110-11, 117, 118-19, 135, 142, 143-44, 150, 151, 153, 154-55, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161-63, 174, 177, 178, 192, 193, 196, 214-15, 216-17, 222, 224, 225
 letters to Johanna Bongers 193
- Gogh, Vincent van
La berceuse (Portrait of Augustine Roulin) (F 504 JH 1655) 15, 28, 29, 45, 59, 217, 219
Café terrace at night (F 467 JH 1580) 184
'The man from Granville' (RM 5) 21-22, 24
Mountain landscape with black refuge (The Alpilles) (F 622 JH 1766) 222, 223
La mousmé (F 431 JH 1519) 204, 205
Night café (F 463 JH 1575) 119
The novel reader (F 497 JH 1632) 204, 215
Oleanders (F 593 JH 1566) 170
Parisian novels (F 358 JH 1612) 185, 187
The poet (F 462 JH 1574) 28, 184
Portrait of Doctor Gachet (F 753 JH 2007) 15, 188

- Gogh, Vincent van (continued)
Portrait of Patience Escalier (F 443 JH 1548) 178
The potato eaters (F 1661 JH 737) 120, 121, 136, 165-66
Reminiscence of the garden at Etten (F 496 JH 1630) 215, 216
Reminiscence of the garden at Etten; letter sketch (F – JH 1631) 215, 216
Self-portrait as a bonze (F 476 JH 1581) 199, 200, 201
Starry night (Night study) (F 612 JH 1731) 15, 28, 184, 220, 221
Starry night over the Rhône (F 474 JH 1592) 184, 221, 222
Still life with a statuette (F 360 JH 1349) 15, 177, 188, 189, 190
Still life with Bible (F 117 JH 946) 15, 167-69, 168, 188
Still life with Parisian novels (Romans parisiens) (F 359 JH 1332) 177, 185, 186, 187
Sunflowers 30, 45, 151
Three books (F 335 JH 1226) 180
View of Paris from Montmartre (F 262 JH 1102) 176
Wheatfield with crows (F 779 JH 2117) 225
Woman reading a novel (F – JH 1633) 6, 215
Gogh, Wil van (sister), letters to 6, 57, 118, 188-90, 193, 207, 213, 215, 216, 216, 222, 224
Gogh-Bonger, Johanna van 74, 152, 193
Goncourt, Edmond de
Chérie 166, 170, 174
La fille Elisa 193-94
Goncourt, Jules and Edmond de 16, 37, 83, 87, 99, 104-5, 113, 145, 147, 170-71, 174, 198, 202, 212
Germinie Lacerteux 188, 190, 193-94, 218, 227
Gospels 25, 38, 51, 55, 63-64, 73, 88-89, 94, 95, 98, 134; quoted 42, 59, 64, 94, 114
Goupil, Jules Adolphe 62
A young citizen of the year V 62, 63
Goupil & Co. 15, 26, 27, 50, 87
Granville 22, 24, 28
Greer, Joan 168
Groningen school 29
Gruson, Auguste: *Histoire des croisades* 85
Hague, The 26, 45, 59, 69, 77, 83, 87, 90, 98, 100, 101, 103, 105, 109, 113, 118, 129-47, 150, 155, 165, 169, 177, 186
School 83, 130
Halévy, Ludovic: *Labbé Constantin* 207, 244 (n. 280)
Hammacher, A.M. 15-16, 239 (n. 198)
Havard, Henry: 'Johannes Vermeer', quoted 165, 240 (n. 212)
Hébert, Ernest: *Christ on the Mount of Olives* 51
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 191
Heine, Heinrich 27, 30, 31, 32, 218
Reisebilder 31
Herkomer, Hubert von 110, 146
Heugten, Sjraar van 169
Hobbema, Meindert 50, 82, 164
Homer 123, 225
Hoornik, Clasina (Sien) 28, 59, 90, 98-99, 113-14, 131, 133-37, 143, 144-45, 153, 157, 165, 184, 204
Hugo, Victor 27, 31, 37, 49, 70, 73, 74, 82, 85, 89, 94, 98, 110, 111, 113, 114-15, 123, 139, 141, 143, 145, 146, 156, 159, 165, 173, 174, 221
L'année terrible 184
Le dernier jour d'un condamné 49, 72, 74
Les misérables 113, 164, 165, 175, 227
Notre-Dame de Paris 110, 175
Les travailleurs de la mer 28, 217, 218
Hulsker, Jan 16, 167, 175, 188, 190
Huysmans, Joris-Karl 42, 178
A rebours 42, 178
A vau-l'eau 201
En ménage 42, 221
hymns 32; quoted 48
Illustration 24
Impressionists 103, 133, 171, 173, 178, 198, 243-44 (n. 264)
Ingres, Jean-Auguste-Dominique 172-73
Israëls, Jozef 99, 107, 110, 146
Jansen, Leo 18, 206
Japan, Japanese style 127, 146, 170-71, 177, 184, 196, 198-201, 203-4, 207, 211, 226
Jesus Christ 36-37, 38, 46, 47, 50, 51, 53, 55, 57, 63-65, 86, 87, 98, 105, 107, 108, 119, 122, 126, 145
as an artist 124-25
Jones, Rev. Thomas *see* Slade-Jones
Karr, Alphonse 24, 177
Kate, Jan ten 25, 27, 61
Kempis, Thomas à: *The imitation of Jesus Christ* 27, 32, 33, 35-37, 55, 60, 74-76, 78, 95, 139, 209; quoted 60, 74-75, 76
Kerssemakers, Anton 171
Kock, Paul de 123
Kôdera, Tsukasa 17, 45, 79, 87, 126, 175

- Lamartine, Alphonse de 27
 Lamennais, Félicité de 27, 36-37
 Laurillard, Rev. Eliza 25, 35
 Laval, Charles 214, 215
 London 26, 44, 79, 116, 177
 Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth 30, 55; quoted 56
 Loti, Pierre 57, 185, 187, 191, 197, 211, 212, 215, 220
 Madame Chrysanthème 197, 198-201, 203-4, 207, 211; quoted 198, 199, 203, 204
 Le mariage de Loti 198
 Mon frère Yves 211
 Pêcheur d'Islande 15, 28, 132, 215, 217, 218
 Lövgren, Sven 15, 17, 188
 Luijten, Hans 18
- Maaten, Jacob Jan van der: *Burial in the cornfield* 62-63
Magasin Pittoresque, Le 24
 Mallarmé, Stéphane 15, 178; quoted 113
 Manet, Edouard 176, 226
 Mantz, Paul 18, 124, 128, 161-63; quoted 123-24, 126
 Maris, Mathijs (Thijs) 21, 32, 61, 82, 85
 Marx, Karl 191
 Maupassant, Guy de 35, 87, 147, 185, 187, 188, 190, 191, 194-95, 195, 206, 210, 212, 220
 Bel-Ami 132, 175, 186, 188, 190, 201, 202; quoted 188
 'Le Horla' 217-18
 La maison Tellier 188
 Mont-Oriol 188
 Pierre et Jean 84, 194, 196; preface 83, 194, 197; quoted 194
 Mauve, Anton 13, 26, 100, 102, 130, 131, 153, 172
Mercure de France 12, 18, 223
 Mérimée, Prosper 138
 Meryon, Charles 82
 Mialaret, Athénais 91
 Michel, Georges 61
 Michelet, Jules 15, 16, 19, 24, 27, 28-30, 31, 32, 35, 36, 38, 49, 50, 51, 57, 58, 62, 73, 74, 76, 78, 85, 87, 88-100, 89, 101, 108, 109-10, 113-15, 117, 119, 121, 128, 129, 131, 133, 134, 139, 145, 146, 156, 158, 159, 164, 174, 177
 L'amour 51, 88, 91, 99, 119; quoted 95, 99, 235-36 (n. 135)
 La femme 91, 99
 Histoire de France 51, 90, 95, 164
 Histoire de la révolution française 62, 76, 90, 94, 99, 128, 210
 L'insecte 27, 91, 98
 La mer 27, 28, 91, 98, 99; quoted 28
 La montagne 27, 91
- Michelet (continued)
 L'oiseau 27, 28, 29-30, 91-93, 98, 136, 156; quoted 29-30, 91-93, 94, 136, 138, 142
 Le peuple 90-91, 99-100, 113; quoted 94, 95
 Des jésuites (with Edgar Quinet) 38, 98; quoted 95
 Midi (Provence) 133, 181-83, 185, 191, 194, 198, 206-7, 209, 213, 214, 215
 Atelier du 214
 Millet, Jean-François 18, 50, 58, 75, 105-6, 107, 110, 111, 113, 116, 121, 122-28, 146, 149, 161, 162, 163, 175, 195, 202
 The church at Gréville 50-51, 52
 Peasants bringing home a calf 125-26, 125, 127
 Monet, Claude 210
 Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, baron de 191
 Monticelli, Adolphe 105, 213, 214, 226
 Moréas, Jean (Ioannis Papadiamantopoulos) 178
 Moret, Henry 214, 215
 Morice, Charles 197
 Mourier-Petersen, Christian Vilhelm 210-12
 Muller, Charles Louis Lucien 62
 Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker) 101
 Musset, Alfred de 27, 30, 144-45; quoted 48
- Napoléon III 164, 173
 Naturalism 16, 17, 39, 57, 69, 74, 76, 83-84, 101, 102, 104-6, 108-11, 114, 130-47, 156, 159-60, 177, 178, 180, 195, 209, 218, 221, 237 (n. 151)
 Nerval, Gérard de 138
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 57; quoted 114, 192
 Nordenfalk, Carl 14-15
 Nuenen 43, 149-66, 167, 168, 169, 171, 174, 177, 195, 202, 203
- Ohnet, Georges 207
- Pabst, Fieke 17, 30, 42
 Paris 19, 26, 42, 44, 48, 77, 79, 90, 113, 123, 133, 138, 141, 150, 156, 159, 161, 171-92, 193, 195, 197, 209, 210, 212, 227
 Louvre 39, 88, 174
 Montmartre 50, 173, 175-77, 176
 Musée du Luxembourg 50
 Le Tambourin 185-86
 Paul, St 37, 43, 140, 207; *Epistles* 46, 63-64, 140, 153
 Petrarch 15
 Pickvance, Ronald 139
 Pissarro, Camille 196
 Pollock, Griselda 16, 85, 87
 Pont-Aven 215
 Protais, Alexandre-Paul 35
 Proudhon, Pierre 112, 145, 156
 Provence *see* Midi

- Quinet, Edgar 38, 98
- Rabelais, François 187, 190
- Rappard, Anthon van 86, 144, 146, 155, 167
correspondence with 28, 38, 85, 86, 109, 117
- Reid, Thomas Mayne 208
- Rembrandt 39, 50, 75, 76, 93-94, 105, 108, 109, 118, 164, 224, 225
- Renan, Ernest 16, 27, 30, 38, 43, 46-47, 51, 66, 79, 89, 221, 224, 225; quoted 47, 56, 227
Jésus 38
La vie de Jésus 38, 51
- Renoir, Pierre-Auguste 176
- Reve, Gerard, quoted 243 (n. 254)
- Revolutions, French: (1789) 31, 62, 64, 75-76, 85, 90, 93, 94, 95, 116-17, 128, 156, 164, 173, 175; (1830) 85, 90, 116-17, 173; (1848) 85, 163, 164, 173
- Revue des Deux-Mondes*, *La* 24
- Rewald, John 177
- Richepin, Jean: *Braves gens* 180-81, 180
- Rimbaud, Arthur 15, 178
- Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe) 71, 109
- Roche, Edmond: *Poésies posthumes*, quoted 44, 45
- Rocheport, Henri 187, 190
- Rod, Edouard: *Le sens de la vie* 221-23
- Roll, Alfred 161-62
Marianne Offrey, vegetable seller 161, 162
- romanticism 16, 17, 27-28, 29, 30, 31, 51, 104-5, 114, 116, 172
- Rosenblum, Robert 17
- Rossetti, Christina, quoted 48
- Roulin, Augustine 219
- Roulin, Joseph 37, 118
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 191
- Rückert, Friedrich 27, 29, 32, 35
- Ruisdael, Jacob 82
- Ruysdael, Salomon 50, 82
- Sainte-Beuve, Charles-Augustin 22, 27-28, 30
- Saint-Rémy-de-Provence 31, 56, 79, 188, 221, 223, 224
- Salles, Frédéric 188
- Sand, George 144
- Scheffer, Ary 103
Christus consolator 36, 80, 81
- Schopenhauer, Arthur 191
- Scott, Walter 116, 123
- Segatori, Agostina 184, 185, 204
- Sensier, Alfred: *La vie et l'œuvre de Jean-François Millet* 18, 105, 113, 116, 122-24, 126-27, 175; quoted 75, 105, 122, 123, 126, 127, 166
- Serret, Charles Emmanuel 151
- Seurat, Georges 214, 215
- Seznec, Jean 15
- Shakespeare, William 15, 49, 57, 71, 94, 116, 118, 123, 145, 221, 224, 225
- Siberdt, Eugène 172, 174
- Silvestre, Armand 30
- Silvestre, Théophile: *Eugène Delacroix, documents nouveaux* 116-21; quoted 117, 118, 119, 120-21
- Slade-Jones, Annie 21, 32
- Slade-Jones, Rev. Thomas 35
- Socrates 108, 118-19, 212, 225
- Souvestre, Emile 24, 30, 47, 77, 79, 177
Les derniers Bretons 79
Un philosophe sous les toits 76-79, 135, 175; quoted 32, 43, 78
- Stendhal (Henry Beyle) 138
- Stolwijk, Chris 44
- Sund, Judy 17, 58, 73, 74, 79, 83, 87, 103, 105, 131, 139, 143, 167, 168-69, 171, 175, 178, 180, 188
- Taine, Hippolyte 90
- Tanguy, père Julien and Mme 202, 212
- Tersteeg, Hermanus Gijsbertus 13, 100, 105, 129, 131, 137, 153
- Thoré, Théophile (William Bürger) 38-40, 39, 50, 82, 90, 127, 128, 163, 164-65
'Champfleury', quoted 164
'Hobbema', quoted 82, 164
Musées de la Hollande, quoted 39, 138
- Tilborgh, Louis van 167, 169
- Tissot, James 82
- Titian 103
- Turgenev, Ivan 15, 84
- Uhland, Ludwig 27, 30, 31, 32, 61
- Uitert, Evert van 17, 169
- Van Dyck, Anthony 99
- Velázquez 118
- Vellekoop, Marije 167
- Verkade-Bruining, A. 17, 59, 79, 87, 126
- Verlaine, Paul 15, 178
- Verlat, Charles 172
- Vermeer 50, 105, 164
- Verne, Jules 187, 191, 210, 211
Le docteur Ox 211
Les enfants du Capitaine Grant (The mysterious document) 211-12
- Veronese 103
- Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène-Emmanuel 82
- Voltaire 56, 191
Candide 37, 42, 132, 185, 190, 191, 196, 206, 220
Zadig 191; quoted 56

Vos, Kee 85, 90, 96-99, 113, 136, 153, 157, 158,
184, 204

Wagner, Richard 191, 218

Welsh-Ovcharov, Bogomila 177

Whitman, Walt 15

Zegers, Peter Kort 18, 45, 199, 204

Ziem, Félix 206

Zola, Emile 15-16, 19, 30, 35, 37, 39, 57, 58, 69,
70, 79, 99, 100, 101-6, 102, 108, 110, 111,
113-14, 115, 130, 131, 133-35, 136, 137, 139, 143,
145, 146-47, 156, 159, 160, 162, 163, 169,
173, 177, 178-79, 180, 191, 194, 209, 210, 212

L'assommoir 193, 194

Au bonheur des dames 158, 160, 174-75, 201,
202

La faute de l'abbé Mouret 133, 166, 191

Germinal 79, 106, 113, 149, 163, 166, 178

Mes haines, Mon salon 18, 103, 104, 165;
quoted 84, 103, 112

La joie de vivre 167-69, 168, 170, 193, 194

Nana 145

L'œuvre 171-73, 174

Une page d'amour 58, 102, 104, 106

Pot-bouille 124, 175

Le rêve 133

La terre 106, 133, 178-79, 179

Le ventre de Paris 114, 137, 143, 174, 175

Zundert 41, 47, 79

About the author

Wouter van der Veen gained a PhD from the University of Utrecht in 2007 for his doctoral dissertation on *Literature in Vincent van Gogh's correspondence*, on which the current publication *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind*, is based. Currently Van der Veen is working as an author, editor and publisher. He created Arthénon in 2005, a publishing company for contemporary art in Strasbourg (France), while continuing to contribute to the Van Gogh Museum's forthcoming edition of Van Gogh's complete correspondence (to be published in 2009), for which, in 1999 and 2000, he was responsible for the transcription of Van Gogh's letters written in French. In 2004, he published *Dans la chambre de Vincent* (Editions Desmaret, Strasbourg 2004). His articles include "En tant que quant à moi", Vincent van Gogh and the French language' (*Van Gogh Museum Journal*, Amsterdam 2002), 'An avid reader – Van Gogh and literature' (exh. cat. *Vincent's choice*, Amsterdam 2003), 'Van Gogh – Millet: la voce del grano' (exh. cat. *Gauguin – Van Gogh, L'avventura del colore nuovo*, Brescia 2005), 'Regard sur une mutation: La photographie de presse des années 1920 à aujourd'hui' (exh. cat. *Mois de la photo* 2006, Paris 2006), and 'Les terres de Van Gogh' (*Identités Néerlandaises*, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Lille 2006).

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Van Gogh: A Literary Mind is dedicated to my father, J.A. van der Veen (1930-2007).

Vincent van Gogh was a voracious reader. In his letters he mentions more than one hundred and fifty authors from some ten countries, at least two hundred works in four languages, and almost three thousand years of literary history. From Homer to Zola, Van Gogh read, copied, rejected, adored, quoted, distorted, re-read, condemned and recommended countless books and articles. This second volume of *Van Gogh Studies* examines Van Gogh's literary journey as it emerges through the 1100 references found in his correspondence. It is an exploration of the literary universe of a passionate reader, in constant search of texts that could be applied to his own reality.

Having worked on the *Van Gogh Letters Project*, Wouter van der Veen has made a close study of the most important texts referred to in Van Gogh's correspondence, and has come to the surprising conclusion that Van Gogh was seldom influenced, in the sense that many art historians have argued, by what he read but rather regarded literature as a mirror that reflected and confirmed his own views.

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